

DONNA FERRANTE'S LIBRARY: RESONANCE OF THE CLASSICS IN THE *NEAPOLITAN NOVELS*

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Do we let ourselves go back to the ancients, or do they catch up with us? No matter.

- Christa Wolf, *Medea*

Virgil is too important to be left to the classicists.

- Theodore Ziolkowski, *Virgil and the Moderns*

My research will keep a distance from the endless *querelle* over Elena Ferrante's identity. For my title, I have in fact followed Ferrante's caveat on literary oeuvres and took the liberty of playing a pun based on Italian literature itself. As Ferrante explains in *Frantumaglia*, she thinks, as Calvino before her, that "di un autore contano solo le opere."¹ Her pseudonym is all the more meaningful when we understand that her will as a writer is that her works solely speak for her.² As she points out beautifully in *Frantumaglia*: "Le parole che diventano pubbliche sono di tutti... I libri sono di chi li ha scritti solo quando il loro ciclo è compiuto e nessuno li legge più."³ I will thus follow closely her will and have her volumes speak for the author. In my title, I have stressed the importance of literature for Ferrante and the explanation of its intended pun will lead to the unraveling of the matter of my research. And while, on one hand, I am going to follow Manzoni's model as a cognitive

¹ *La Frantumaglia*, 80. *Frantumaglia*, 85: "...only the works of an author count..."

² The assonance of the pseudonym Elena Ferrante with Elsa Morante is quite striking (the first two letters of the names and the last five of the surname overlap.) Elsa Morante has been one of Italy's most famous "scrittori", or, as she would have alternatively defined herself; "una poeta." Ferrante pays homage to Morante more than once in *La Frantumaglia*, recognizing a profound literary debt to the author. It will be noted here, tangentially, that one of Elena's daughters in the *Neapolitan Novels* is named Elsa.

³ *La Frantumaglia*, 180. *Frantumaglia*, 188. "Words that become public belong to everyone... Books belong to those who have written them only when their cycle is complete and no one reads them anymore."

paradigm, on the other hand, I am going to operate a subversion of the mode in its hermeneutical implications.

In the *Promessi Sposi*, Italy's first historical novel, Alessandro Manzoni describes Don Ferrante as one of his inane characters and has his private library speak for him. The writer chronicles Ferrante's library in detail, with impressive realism on the cultural trends of the novel's time. The "poco meno di trecento volumi"⁴ Don Ferrante owns well characterize him as a typical seventeenth-century erudite who pays a rather formal and empty homage to knowledge.

In my research, I will make an attempt at recreating Ferrante's (this time, a Donna's) Classical Library, drawing from intertextual references from *Frantumaglia* and from the *Neapolitan Novels*. In my pun I took Ferrante as a character herself, because I will try to do what Manzoni did with Don Ferrante when recreating the impressively realistic library of a Seventeenth-Century Lombard man. However, far from speaking of a useless pedantry towards erudition, "Donna Ferrante"'s library speaks for her solid background in the Classics, Italian, German and European literature as well as her knowledge on cinema⁵ and feminism. This brings me to the subversion of Manzoni's operation: "Donna Ferrante"'s books are more diverse in content and, especially, they are employed in a whole different manner epistemologically than those of Don Ferrante. My title is only based on a pun at the level of the signifiers. As far as the meaning is concerned, Ferrante's use of intertextuality is a consistent and sapient one, which also reveals a *penchant* for metaliterature. Far from lessening the author's grand use of diverse texts, and acknowledging the rather daunting task of recreating a writer's complete library, my study will be an attempt at covering her

⁴ *I Promessi Sposi*, 555. "Don Ferrante passava di grand'ore nel suo studio, dove aveva una raccolta di libri considerabile, poco meno di trecento volumi: tutta roba scelta, tutte opere delle più riputate, in varie materie; in ognuna delle quali egli era più o meno versato." *The Betrothed*, 505. "Don Ferrante passed much time in his study, where he had a considerable collection of choice books; he had selected the most famous works on many different subjects, in each of which he was more or less versed."

⁵ Apart from the author's multiple references to films and actors pertaining to the golden age of Hollywood, I believe a scene in the last book of the series could be taken from Federico Fellini's masterpiece *8 1/2*. *Infra*.

Classical intertextual and metaliterary references throughout the *Neapolitan Novels*.

Particularly, I am going to have *Frantumaglia* as a guide for the selection of thematic and literary conglomerates the writer brings about in the *Neapolitan Novels*. As we will see, these references lead to other important literary issues such as, for example, that of Classical references to heroines, the linked and bigger issue of women's writing as born from (and opposed to) men's writing and the grounding of these problems in the masculine foundational myth of spaces. On this matter, reconfiguring authorial matters will bring us to reconfigure the spaces (mental and physical) in which characters operate.

I should forewarn the reader, however, that I will not be reading *Frantumaglia* as an actual collection of interviews or essays by Ferrante on her own work, but as another primary text. This work is, arguably, a place where one should detect different layers of interpretation.⁶ The book contains explicit exegesis on particular loci of her novels that I will be following, and, after having analyzed the intertextual weight of the assumptions made, cautiously evaluate their actual interpretive usefulness in respect to the *Neapolitan Novels*.

The tetralogy of the *Neapolitan Novels*,⁷ known in the original as *L'Amica geniale*, tells the story of a life-long, marvelous and complex friendship between two girls coming from the same poor neighborhood in Naples: Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo. Elena is the homodiegetic narrator of the story, which begins with her recounting of the disappearance of her friend, when the two are in their sixties. This event opens up the unraveling of a flashback narrative that spans from the girls' childhood (coinciding, roughly, with the fifties) to 2010. The story also touches some of the most important moments in Italian XX-Century history: the post-war period, the Reconstruction and economic boom, the students' movement in '68, the Red Brigades and the "historical compromise", the rising of the Socialist party, Tangentopoli, the "Second Republic" and Berlusconi's government. In the tetralogy,

⁶ On *La Frantumaglia*, see also *Infra*.

⁷ The English translation probably points to the place where the novels' fiction takes place. For the most part in fact, the novels are set in Naples. They are also known in the variant *Neapolitan Quartet*.

however, history is a backdrop for private characters' lives. I am hereby going to give a synopsis of the plot of the novels.

Raffaella Cerullo (or, as Elena calls her, Lila),⁸ is the smartest kid of the whole school; she learns to read on her own before everybody else and distinguishes herself as one of the best students in mathematics, too. Elena recalls, however, that she is mischievous with her and, in general, a wicked child. The friendship between the two girls is sparked by Lila's throwing of Elena's doll, Tina, in the basement of the evil Don Achille.

While still in elementary school, Lila designs a shoe model which her father, the shoemaker Fernando Cerullo will use for his own shoe line. Lila doesn't go to middle school and starts working in her father's shop. At the age of sixteen she goes off to marry Stefano Carracci. Their wedding proves a disaster because Stefano sells Lila's design shoes to the mafioso Solara brothers. The agreement between Stefano and Marcello Solara leads to the opening of a shoe shop bearing the name of the Solaras, (while selling Cerullo shoes), in Piazza dei Martiri. During their honeymoon, moreover, Stefano rapes Lila and beats her horribly. Later, when Lila and Elena go to Ischia on vacation, the former falls in love with Nino Sarratore. The two start a clandestine relationship and after having worked in her husband's shop for a while, Lila is hired at the Solara shoe shop.⁹ The girl eventually has a child from Stefano: Rino. At one point, Lila goes to live with Nino and her newborn child, but Nino later leaves her. Enzo Scanno saves Lila from a moment of great despair. Enzo is a communist neighborhood guy who always had feelings for her. The two go live in San Giovanni a Teduccio, where Lila works in a factory. At this point Lila is also a militant of the Communist Party. After a while, Lila has a daughter with Enzo, Tina, and goes back to live in the neighborhood. There, she and Enzo open a computer company called "Basic Sight." One day, tragically, her daughter Tina goes missing. This completely annihilates Lila. After

⁸ All the others in the *Novels* call her Lina.

⁹ The scene where Lila's wedding picture takes fire for no apparent reason takes place at this stage in the story. *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 139-140. *The Story of a New Name*. 140. *Infra*.

atrocious pain to her abdomen, Lila even has an operation to her uterus. Towards the end of the tetralogy, she becomes more and more interested in the city of Naples. Finally, Lila disappears. At the end of the story Elena receives a packet with the dolls that the two girls played with as children and that had disappeared for more than 50 years.

Elena Greco is also an intelligent kid, but, as we gather from her narration, she is not as brilliant as Lila. She is however encouraged by her parents to keep on studying and attends middle school. During school she is with Antonio Cappuccio, but is secretly in love with Nino Sarratore. While in Ischia on vacation, however, Elena has to surrender to the course of events: Nino falls in love with Lila. Because of her brilliant results in school, some professors advise her to apply to the Italian University “Scuola Normale Superiore” in Pisa. Elena gets in and moves to Pisa, where she starts living a completely different life, with new friends and a boyfriend. Eventually she also meets her husband, Pietro Airola, and the couple moves to Firenze, where Pietro is an Ancient Greek professor and where their two daughters Elsa and Federica (or Dede), are born. After graduation Elena writes a novel that garners great success. At one point Nino Sarratore comes back into her life and she falls back for him. The two have a secret relationship and travel together for research and conferences. At this point Elena is close to a feminist circle of writers in France. After divorcing from Pietro, Elena goes back to Naples with Nino, although he also has a wife and a kid. One day Elena catches Nino having intercourse with the maid and then finds out that he is a serial cheater. At this point, however, Elena is already pregnant and later has a daughter from Nino: Immacolatella, (or Imma.)¹⁰ Elena decides to go back to live in in a condominium of the neighborhood where she grew up, living in an apartment below Lila, and keeps on writing, but does not have great success. After her daughters go study in America, where they live with her ex-husband

¹⁰ Immacolatella is also Elena’s mother’s name. Lila’s daughter is also named after her grandmother, Nunziatina. It should be noted that Immacolatella and Nunziata both star in Elsa Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo* (*Arturo’s Island*.) Nunziata, or Nunziatella is Arturo’s stepmother, the female protagonist of the story, and Immacolatella is the female dog that Arturo loved so dearly as a kid. Elsa Morante, *L’isola di Arturo*.

Pietro, Elena opens her own publishing house and moves to Turin. In Turin she writes the short story “Un’amicizia.” It is probably because of this book that Lila stops answering her phone calls and then disappears completely. At the very end of the novel, the two dolls that Lila and Elena played with as kids, come back. Someone sends in fact old Elena, in Turin, a packet containing the two dolls.

My first chapter, “The Feminine Founding myth: Ariadne, Dido, Medea” is a close reading from *Frantumaglia*’s chapter “Le Città”. There, Ferrante talks at length about the possible founding of a feminine city or a women’s community. The Classical myths of Ariadne, Dido and Medea come alive in order to indicate the winning models of women (and heroines) in literature. For instance, when a woman can dominate space in a fashion akin to that of Ariadne, she succeeds. In general, however, for Ferrante, cities without love cannot subsist and thrive. This is something that comes back in Lila’s words in *My Brilliant Friend*.¹¹ My interpretation of this sentence owes a debt to Franco Gallippi’s article “Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*: In Search of Parthenope and the ‘Founding’ of a New City.”¹²

In his writing Gallippi posits that in the *Neapolitan Novels*¹³ Lila has the project of founding a new city, which would be connected to the need for a change in the style adopted when writing of Naples. The concept of the city without love is rooted, for Gallippi, in Serao’s *Leggende Napoletane*. Moreover, he sees Lila as the siren Parthenope and confirms this identification through a description of the myth by Serao.

All in all, my interpretation holds similarities to Gallippi’s, but we have very different approaches and conclusions. Importantly, his analysis does not encompass the fourth book of

¹¹ *La Frantumaglia*, 72. “La città senza amore è una città ingiusta e crudele.” *Frantumaglia*, 77. “The city without love is an unjust and cruel city.” *L’amica geniale*, 156. “Se non c’è amore, non solo inaridisce la vita delle persone, ma quella delle città.” *My Brilliant Friend*, 160. “When there is no love, not only the life of the people becomes sterile but the life of cities.”

¹² Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love*, 101-128.

¹³ His identification of the *Neapolitan Novels* with *My Brilliant Friend* is inaccurate, because it is based on the Italian equivalent *L’Amica geniale*, title of the first book of the series as well as cumulative title for the whole tetralogy. Moreover, his analysis focuses on only three of the four books Ferrante wrote.

the tetralogy, nor does it account for the fact that the idea of the “city without love” was already present in *Frantumaglia*. Gallippi’s analysis is, furthermore, philosophical, because he sees Lila as a representation of epistemology (or “the written world”)¹⁴ and Elena as a representation of ontology (“the unwritten world.”)¹⁵ The project for the founding of this city would come, in his vision, from the encounter of these two worlds.

My analysis is purely literary and works with intertextual connections from Ferrante herself, Serao, Calvino and Virgil. As I will elucidate in the course of my work, Ferrante has reworked notions of Roman literature and religion in a way that does not conceive of them as mere models. Often Ferrante employs the past as an instantiation of contemporary issues,¹⁶ which are enlivened by etymological and mythical concepts of the Roman past.

I employ the Classical concepts introduced in my second chapter (i.e, *Genius/genius loci*, *genialis*, heroization, *lararium* and *penates*) in order to illustrate my idea that Lila and Elena might be in search of the founding of a new city, and that Ferrante seeks this out through important references to the *Aeneid*. From this perspective, I attempt to explain that Lila can be seen as a *genius* of Elena. The etymology of the Italian title “geniale”, *genialis*, refers to the sense of doubling, mirroring, exchange and reversal of destinies that the two girls’ friendship depicts. This instantiates and corroborates the idea of Lila as mirroring, doubling image of Elena.

This genius, however, might also well be interpreted as the “creative genius of the author.” In my exegesis of the epigraph to the tetralogy, I attempt to elucidate that Ferrante’s quotation from Goethe’s *Faust* establishes a link between Mephistopheles and Lila. I thus illustrate this through direct quotations from the novels.

Moreover, I point out that the Roman concept of *genius* was, in ancient times, inextricably connected to that of the *genius loci* and that I believe Lila would be a

¹⁴ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love*, 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For the German concept of “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*”, see Lucamante, 86. *Infra*.

representation of both. For this, the concept of heroization is key. I compare this Hellenistic (and then Roman) phenomenon to that of *smarginatura* by Ferrante. This notion will also come back at the end of my thesis, when I elaborate on the *penates*.

All of the aforementioned Classical elements should convey the sense of Lila as a *genius* in the Roman sense, having, among other things, all the appropriate religious paraphernalia. Lila has a sort of *lararium*¹⁷ for herself and, at the end of the story, she leaves behind two dolls which, I posit, could be seen as *penates*. The *penates* are connected to the founding of Rome in the *Aeneid* and so I maintain that the dolls, in the series, might have a similar meaning. Through intertextual comparisons from the *Aeneid*, the *Neapolitan Novels* and Graves' *Greek Myths* I finally show that these statuettes, or dolls, have the task of strengthening Elena's will to "found a new city", whichever this city might be.

"Le Città" quotes the version of Ariadne's myth at Amathus from Graves' *Greek Myths*. Looking closely at the text, I have found out that Graves references two statuettes that Theseus employs in the process of heroization of Ariadne, creating a cult of her person at the site where she died. Furthermore, according to Graves, Ariadne and her sister Phaedra owned two dolls as children and brought them wherever they went. I believe these references are not casual, because they come from a locus of Graves' text that Ferrante cites explicitly. Through this explanation, I attempt to elucidate that Lila underwent some sort of heroization and that the two dolls might be seen in this context as the statuettes of the dead ancestors, reconfirming in the survivors the will to 'found a new city', one that, following Ferrante's suggestions, is capable of hosting love.

¹⁷ *Infra*.

Chapter I: The Feminine Founding Myth: Ariadne, Dido, Medea

The dividing line is rather, as Virginia Woolf said, how much truth the fiction inherent in writing is able to capture.

- Elena Ferrante, *The guardian*, 02-17-18.

Frantumaglia: identity and *auctoritas*

My starting point for recollecting Ferrante's consistent and intertextual references to the Classics is a close reading of a passage from *Frantumaglia*. This work consists of a series of various writings: "Carte, Tessere, Lettere"¹⁸ containing important statements on Ferrante's poetics¹⁹ and, more generally, on her literary creations. *Frantumaglia* is a liminal text in terms of genre. Primarily because of its miscellaneous nature, it is hard to define whether we, as readers, should treat it as a primary text or a secondary one. Most importantly for my research, the text is metaliterary: Ferrante, in it, is referencing her own literary creations and giving summary explanations of how they were conceived. On another level, it is also a commentary on the author's literary models and their influence in her work. I would define

¹⁸ Elena Ferrante, *La Frantumaglia. Nuova edizione ampliata. Frantumaglia*: "Papers, Tesserae, Letters". For my work I am going to reference to the 2016 expanded version and its English translation.

¹⁹ The fact that Elena Ferrante is solely an author and not a public figure leads her to a perfect osmosis, in the interviews collected in *Frantumaglia*, between her life and her literary production. This is what the writer states about her own peculiar authoriality: "Non è poco scrivere sapendo di poter orchestrare per i lettori non solo una storia, personaggi, sentimenti, paesaggi, ma la propria figura di autrice, la più vera perchè fatta di sola scrittura, di pura esplorazione tecnica di una possibilità. Ecco perchè o resto Ferrante o non pubblico più." *La Frantumaglia*, 238. *Frantumaglia*, 247: "It's not a small thing to write knowing that you can orchestrate for readers not only a story, characters, feelings, landscapes but the very figure of the author, the most genuine figure, because it's created from writing alone, from the pure technical exploration of a possibility. That's why I either remain Ferrante or I no longer publish."

Frantumaglia as a “literary workshop,” where Ferrante is able to play to the extreme with her literature and her readings, always confusing the two levels of truth and fiction, which she engages with.

Its publishers intend *La Frantumaglia*, first published in 2003 and then republished in an expanded version in 2016, as an invitation into Ferrante’s workshop as a writer. This is the foreword to the last English edition:

This book invites readers into Elena Ferrante’s workshop. It offers a glimpse into the drawers of her writing desk, those drawers from which emerged her three early standalone novels and the four installments of *My Brilliant Friend*, known in English as the *Neapolitan Quartet*. Consisting of over 20 years of letters, essays, reflections, and interviews, it is a unique depiction of an author who embodies a consummate passion for writing.²⁰

This uncomplicated description does not account for the fact that this book can be seen as problematic for Ferrante’s poetics. Famously, the author has decided to not be identified with any given person, in order to fight the show business that rules today’s literature. Elena Ferrante firmly believes that the works only should speak for an author; his/her biography should not matter. To a curious Danish journalist asking if she was willing to describe herself for the magazine, Ferrante answered:

No. E mi permetta di rifarmi, per questa risposta un po’ brusca, a Italo Calvino che, convinto che di un autore contano solo le opere, nel 1964 scriveva a una studiosa dei suoi libri: ‘...dati biografici non ne do, o li do falsi, o comunque cerco sempre di cambiarli da una volta all’altra. Mi chiedo pure quel che vuol sapere e

²⁰ <https://www.europaeditions.com/book/9781609452926/frantumaglia>. “Questo libro ci porta nel laboratorio di Elena Ferrante, ci permette di dare uno sguardo nei cassetti da cui sono usciti i suoi primi tre romanzi e poi i quattro capitoli dell’*Amica geniale*, offrendo un esempio di passione assoluta per la scrittura.” <https://www.edizionale.it/book/9788866327929/la-frantumaglia>.

glielo dirò, ma non le dirò mai la verità, di questo può star sicura.’ Questo passo mi è sempre piaciuto e almeno parzialmente l’ho fatto mio... Il problema è che, a differenza di Calvino, detesto rispondere a una domanda con un rosario di bugie.²¹

La Frantumaglia, translated in English as *Frantumaglia, A Writer’s Journey*, presents us with the very issue that we, as literary critics, attempt to shun daily. Because of its very genre, - a cahier, a collection of different kinds of writings by and, most of all, *about* the author-, *Frantumaglia* can be deceiving. As Carla Baricz noted in her book review, in fact, the main, insoluble issue at stake with this work is that its genre seems inconsistent with the main argument in Ferrante’s poetics, namely, that one cannot know her identity and this, moreover, should not interest her critics because it is not going to illuminate her text in any way. Interest in a writer’s life is, on the contrary, crucial to the project of *La frantumaglia* and to similar literary cahiers;

Such collections are intended for readers already familiar with the writer’s oeuvre, who at the same time wish to know more about the writer herself. They turn to such collections with the implicit belief that the writer’s comments or pronouncements on her works are relevant to one’s understanding of them. These genres are the stuff of which biographies and literary criticism often are made because they are so thoroughly grounded in the idea that knowledge of the author’s life and his or her views matter: that the author can illuminate the work.²²

²¹ *La Frantumaglia*, 80. *Frantumaglia*, 85. “No. And allow me to cite, for this somewhat abrupt answer, Italo Calvino, who, convinced that only the works of an author count, in 1964 wrote to a scholar of his books: ‘I don’t give biographical facts, or I give false ones, or anyway I always try to change them from one time to the next. Ask me what you want to know, but I won’t tell you the truth, of that you can be sure.’ I’ve always liked the passage, and I’ve made it at least partly mine... The problem is that, unlike Calvino, I hate answering a question with a chain of lies.”

²² <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/frantumaglia-by-elena-ferrante-carla-baricz>

On the autobiographical level, Baricz is right to point out that journalists have seldom understood Ferrante's will and in the interviews often ask questions on her identity. Ferrante has thus, however, the opportunity to further play with her own poetic as an author. In the aforementioned passage, the author notes that the only thing that should matter of an author is his/her own texts. Differently from Calvino, however, she points out that she dislikes lying about herself. In *Frantumaglia*, however, the author gives out personal details that are always somewhat tied to her literary creations. Baricz asks:

Does Ferrante provide such limited (and possibly false) biographical information, which simply reinforces the cultural and literary heritage in which her novels are steeped, in order to underscore the point that all one needs to know about an author can be found in her works? Might it be the case that every single one of those compelling autobiographical moments has its origins in—even derives from—a moment she describes in one of her novels? Is she constructing an *auctor* simply to teach her readers a lesson?²³

My answer to all of these questions, except for the last one, is yes: *Frantumaglia* works as a poetics' declaration. The author has pushed to the limit Calvino's (and others') antipathy for autobiographic notations, finally challenging the very notion of authorship. Through *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante has come to be identifiable with her own literary works solely and completely. In this strange manifesto, the writer makes it crystal clear that identity cannot be defined through the lens of essentialism.²⁴ Her identity, at least, perfectly dovetails with her literature. The reason she constructed this authorial figure (or *auctor*, as Baricz brilliantly

²³ <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/frantumaglia-by-elena-ferrante-carla-baricz>

²⁴ Not only Ferrante's identity resists any essentialist definition, but her gender does too. These things can only be found in her writing. *La Frantumaglia*, 246. "La mia identità, il mio sesso si trovano nella mia scrittura." *Frantumaglia*, 256. "My identity, my sex can be found in my writing."

observes), is not to “teach her readers a lesson,” but to further make a statement on her fundamental right to not be identified with anyone. Moreover, Ferrante created this authorial space not for her audience merely, but, more importantly, for her own creative sphere.

As Viviana Scarinci points out in her profound analysis on the meaning of identity for Ferrante, the author fights the world’s desire to know her identity by utilizing the very notion of “likeness”,²⁵ while simultaneously fighting for her literary characters.

Quello che ci interessa qui è come la nostra autrice, avvalendosi del margine schiuso da tutto ciò che è solo presumibile rispetto alla propria identità, riesca ad utilizzare questo approccio come un vero e proprio veicolo conoscitivo, indicando la presumibilità come un valore necessario al fine di combattere, per se stessa al pari che per i personaggi da lei creati, ogni tipo di credenza relativa a qualsiasi principio identitario infuso dall’alto, preconstituito e codificato.²⁶

While a fight against essentialism as a tool to define identity, *Frantumaglia* also perfectly proves that Ferrante is an *auctor* just like Homer or Virgil are. It is *their works* that define them, not viceversa.

In 2003, when the first edition of *Frantumaglia* came out, Ferrante had not yet written the tetralogy of the *Neapolitan Novels*. In fact, we will see that, in the chapter I analyze, she only references her most recent novel *The Days of Abandonment*. However, I am going to show that her ideas on the relation between women and their cities in literature are basis for the devisal of these same interconnections in the *Neapolitan Novels*. We will see that this

²⁵ In Italian, “presumibilità.”

²⁶ <http://www.lavoroculturale.org/elena-ferrante-identita-poetica/> (My transl.) “That which interests us here is that our author, availing herself from the closed margins of all that which we can assume with respect to her own identity, she succeeds at utilizing this approach like a true and exact cognitive vehicle, indicating that which we can assume from her writing like a necessary valor in order to fight, for herself and for the characters she created, any type of identitarian principle instilled from a higher power, which has been pre-established and codified.”

proves especially true for Dido, (but also for Ariadne and Medea), as an archetypal model for Ferrante's female protagonists and for their relationships with surrounding spaces and men in her novels.

For my present research, I will focus on the chapter entitled "Le Città"²⁷ and on its important intertextual connections. I will utilize the ties among texts that Ferrante establishes as a springboard for elucidating the author's viewpoint on the relationship between literary female figures and the cities they inhabit. The author's commentary on Classical works serves as starting point to understand the reception of these models in the *Neapolitan Novels*.

"The Cities" spurs the reader to rethink generally accepted views on cities as places that are founded and ruled exclusively by men,²⁸ via multiple literary examples. Firstly, the chapter shares some similarities with a passage also by Ferrante, contained in *My Brilliant Friend*.²⁹ This piece also bears intertextual connections to Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*, Robert Graves' *Greek Myths* and to the fourth book of the *Aeneid*. Ultimately, Ferrante references Greek tragedies, by alluding to the figures of Antigone and Medea.³⁰

One could assess the problematic interrelation of women and cities from different viewpoints: a historical one, a socio-political one, or, even, from the viewpoint of women and gender studies. The interconnection of spaces and genders has been studied from all of these perspectives because it is fertile ground for the advancement of multiple research fields. In my thesis, however, I will keep track of the importance of Ferrante's metacommentary on her own literary oeuvre via her allusions to Classical and Italian literature. This intertextual aspect of *Frantumaglia* marks the philosophical continuity between Classical and Italian literature. In this context, we will briefly see how the Neapolitan writer Matilde Serao

²⁷ *La Frantumaglia*, 132-144. *Frantumaglia*: "The Cities" 141-153.

²⁸ Ferrante's ideas of a gendered space have certainly filiated from feminist thought and especially from second-wave feminism. According to these theories, women should make an attempt at appropriating public spaces, finally achieving a full citizenship in what has always been a men's *polis*. Di Bianco in Lombardi, Uva, 182.

²⁹ *L'amica geniale*, 68-75. *My Brilliant Friend*, 73-79.

³⁰ *La Frantumaglia*, 144. *Frantumaglia*, 153.

influenced Ferrante's conception (and writing) of the city. Ferrante has in fact a particular way of looking at cities and at their stories, one that is certainly indebted to Classical myth and literature, but also to Matilde Serao's works. Serao's *Leggende napoletane* and *Il ventre di Napoli* are in fact paramount in this context.

The core of Ferrante's philosophical inquiry is, ultimately, purely literary. In what way can the author describe a certain space? What is the relation, in the process of writing, between the author's gender and its fictional creations?³¹ How can, ultimately, a woman describe a city, if she does not have her own space in it?³²

The other Italian author that Ferrante arguably looks at, in this context, is Italo Calvino. In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino in fact creates a fictional city of desire:³³ Zobeides, where men have entrapped their dream-woman (or, better, woman-dream.) We will see how Ferrante's description of Carthage and, in general, of her own fictional cities also features this theme.³⁴

The starting point for our discussion on gendered spaces in literature is that the *civitas* or, in Greek, the *polis*, has always been a male construct.³⁵ Ferrante attempts to disrupt and ultimately reverse this notion via a sustained reference to Classical female characters of Greek and Roman literature. This same tradition has engendered the concept of the city as an exclusively masculine space, in both its founding and its sustenance. Ultimately, Ferrante turns this tradition on its head, showing that Greek and Roman (or, better, Carthaginian)

³¹ The collapse of fictional and real life, in this context, has already been explored by Virginia Woolf in *A room of her own*. Just at the beginning of her lecture on "Women and Fiction", Woolf wanders: "The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light." *A room of her own*, 1. As we will see Ferrante in "The Cities" is also playing with these various notions on women and fiction.

³² On this, see also Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*. *Infra*.

³³ "Le Città e il desiderio", 51. "Cities and desire", 39.

³⁴ *Infra*.

³⁵ This detail has seldom been pointed out by scholars of the Classical world, because it is a given of Roman and Greek culture. On myths of foundation, however, see Létoublon, 1989 and Bettini, 2017.

heroines had not only understood the city (and space in general) better than men, but that in one exceptional case, they were able to found a new city.

“The cities” begins with diaristic notations on the city of Naples and the feeling of love. The two share a curious connection, one that, -the author claims,-, she found already present in her Classical readings. In these pages Ferrante moves across an incredibly wide stylistic spectrum; from autobiographic notations to commentary on Classical myths, and back to the former diaristic form.³⁶

In “Le Città”, however, Ferrante is also tracing her literary project on the representation of the relationship between love and the city, one that is certainly informed by Matilde Serao’s *Il ventre di Napoli*. As Franco Gallippi has noted in his article “Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*: In Search of Parthenope and the ‘Founding’ of a New City”,³⁷ Ferrante’s theories on space and gender are strongly informed by Serao. Before assessing Serao’s view on the city, however, we have to go back to the old Neapolitan myth of Parthenope. In the myth, Parthenope is a siren that, from the island of Megaride, attempts to enchant Ulysses with her singing; the tragic end sees Parthenope disappearing and blending into the geographical area of the bay, constituting, for the Neapolitan community, a symbol for the city. Serao’s *Leggende Napoletane* deals with this myth and, as Gallippi noted in his article,³⁸ designates Parthenope as love: “Parthenope, the virgin, the woman, doesn’t die, she has no tomb, she is immortal, she is love.”³⁹

In “Le città”, Ferrante shares Serao’s conception and goes as far as saying that a city without this love is an impossible place to live in. The first chapter of *Leggende Napoletane*, entitled “La città dell’amore”, makes it clear that “Le nostre leggende sono l’amore. E Napoli

³⁶ This is a shared feature in Ferrante’s writings, because the author usually interweaves her own personal experience with a wide-range readings in the Classics and in modern literature. This is, again, a consequence of Ferrante’s poetics of a somewhat radical form of authoriality, which encompasses all her writing.

³⁷ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love*, 101-128. *Infra*.

³⁸ *Supra*. Gallippi, however, assesses Serao’s influence solely on the *Neapolitan Novels*, and not on *Frantumaglia*.

³⁹ Serao, *Leggende Napoletane*, 26. Translation by Gallippi. Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love*, 102-103.

è stata creata dall'amore."⁴⁰ And she also marks Naples as the city of love: "Napoli è la città dell'amore."⁴¹

In *Il ventre di Napoli*, Serao points out that it is not enough to "sventrare Napoli"⁴² ("to gut the city out".) This is a famous phrase by Depretis, prime minister at the time, used then as the slogan for the much-sought "Risanamento" ("Healing") of the city by mayor Nicola Amore. Naples had in fact been disfigured by cholera in 1884 and Amore sought to create a new urban plan, which would provide a new sewage system, in order to bring better hygienic norms to the most indigent neighborhoods. *Il ventre di Napoli* recounts of the ruthlessly cynical plans of the Italian government on Naples: poor neighborhoods had to be gutted out, and people pushed out of the city, so that the state could get a profit from economic investments on the sewage system. For these reasons,

To destroy the material and moral corruption, to replenish the health and conscience of the poor, to teach them how to live, - they know how to die, you have seen! - to tell them they are your brothers, that we truly love them, that we want to save them, it is not enough to gut Naples: one practically needs to rebuild it entirely.⁴³

In the aforementioned article, Franco Gallippi links Serao's description of the necessity to rebuild Naples from scratch to Lila's need for the "founding of a new city"⁴⁴ in the *Neapolitan Novels*.

⁴⁰ Serao, *Leggende Napoletane*, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, 3. The expression "sventrare" is taken from Paris' infamous restructuring by Haussmann (1852-1869). Serao's title *Il ventre di Napoli* is also, it should be noted here, an explicit reference to the 1873 French novel *Le ventre de Paris* by Emile Zola, also dealing with the urban and social restructuring of an old city.

⁴³ Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, 46. Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love, 104 (His translation.)

⁴⁴ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love... An important, if banal observation on Naples is that its etymology, in Greek, is exactly that of "nea polis": "new city".

In “The Cities” Ferrante had already touched on these same issues: there, she envisions a city where love is not only accepted, but it can ultimately rule the urban structure. I am thus going to take Gallippi’s assessments⁴⁵ a step further, linking Serao’s conceptions on Naples to *Frantumaglia*’s “The cities”. The literary refrain in *Frantumaglia* is in fact that a city without love should not exist. In “*La città senza amore. Risposte alle domande di Goffredo Fofi*”,⁴⁶ Ferrante points out that: “La città senza amore è una città ingiusta e crudele.”⁴⁷ These same conceptions on cities are in their turn grounded in references to the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, as well as in Classical myth and literature.

The idea of the city of Naples as “donna-città”,⁴⁸ “città-bella donna”,⁴⁹ “polis d’amore”,⁵⁰ or “sirena perversa”,⁵¹ opposed to a “labirinto”,⁵² “città-labirinto”⁵³ is a mixture of various literary sensibilities, spanning from Classical myth to contemporary Italian literature. That the opposition between the two ways of conceiving the cities is represented as a “woman-versus-man” pattern should also be taken into account here.

Following the author’s erudite commentary on the Classics, one perceives that the same themes in the devisal of spaces and genders resurface in Serao and Calvino. This underlines the continuity that exists between Latin and Italian literature.

⁴⁵ Analyzing Twentieth Century Neapolitan women writers’ descriptions of Naples is certainly rewarding. Looking, for example, at Morante’s Procida in *L’isola di Arturo*, (which Ferrante cites in *Frantumaglia* in relation to her envision of motherhood and womanhood, more generally), or at Ortese’s Naples in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* can only prove rewarding. On this, see Re in *California Italian Studies*, 3(1).

⁴⁶ *La Frantumaglia*, 71. *Frantumaglia*, 76: “The City Without Love. Answers to questions from Goffredo Fofi.”

⁴⁷ *La Frantumaglia*, 72. *Frantumaglia*, 77: “The city without love is an unjust and cruel city.”

⁴⁸ *La Frantumaglia*, 62. *Ibid.*, 67 “woman-city.”

⁴⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Ibid.*, 149: “city-beautiful woman.”

⁵⁰ *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Ibid.*, 150: “polis of love.”

⁵¹ *La Frantumaglia*, 61. *Ibid.*, 66: “a perverse siren.”

⁵² *La Frantumaglia*, 61. *Ibid.*, 66: “labyrinth.”

⁵³ *La Frantumaglia*, 138. *Ibid.*, 146: “city-labyrinths.”

“Le Città”

“The Cities” begins with a scene that we will see happen again in *My Brilliant Friend*: two young girls disobey their mothers and wander through Naples, beyond their known spaces. The two passages resemble each other in content and, more importantly, in their idea of the relationship between the city and the girls.

This is the incipit of “Le Città”, where Ferrante and her sister, as children, set out to their disobedient sally:

Una mattina..., avevo undici anni – due ragazzini appena più grandi, compagni di giochi e innamorati silenziosi, invitarono me e mia sorella a prendere un gelato. Nostra madre ci aveva assolutamente vietato di allontanarci dal cortile dell’edificio dove abitavamo. Noi invece fummo tentate dal gelato, dall’amore possibile, e decidemmo di disobbedire. Disobbedienza si tirò dietro disobbedienza. Non ci limitammo ad arrivare al bar in fondo alla strada, ma prese dal piacere di fare le donne sfrenate, ci spingemmo molto lontano, fino ai giardini di Piazza Cavour, fino al Museo...⁵⁴

The passage closely recalls Lila and Elena’s trip across (and beyond) the tunnel of the neighborhood in *My Brilliant Friend*.⁵⁵ In chapter 16 of the first book of the series, in fact,

⁵⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 132. *Frantumaglia*, 141: “One morning... I was eleven –two boys who were scarcely older, playmates who were scarcely older, playmates who were silently in love, invited my sister and me to get an ice cream. Our mother had absolutely forbidden us to leave the courtyard of the building where we lived. But we were tempted by the ice cream, by the prospect of love, and decided to disobey. One act of disobedience led to another. We didn’t limit ourselves to going to the café at the end of the street, but, absorbed by the pleasure of acting as uninhibited women, we kept going, all the way to the gardens of Piazza Cavour, to the Museum...”

⁵⁵ *L’Amica geniale*, 68-75. *My Brilliant Friend*, 73-79.

Lila and Elena, as children, decide to skip school and venture out of the boundaries of the neighborhood.⁵⁶

Poco prima dell'esame di licenza elementare Lila mi spinse a fare un'altra delle tante cose che da sola non avrei mai avuto il coraggio di fare. Decidemmo di non andare a scuola e passammo i confini del rione...⁵⁷

Here, Lila convinces Elena to skip school and to go to the seaside, on foot. The adventure soon proves a failure; Lila does not know the way to the sea and a great rainstorm prevents the children from reaching their destination. Ultimately, while Elena would want to go to the seaside, no matter what, Lila drags her back to the neighborhood, running under the rain.

Guardai meglio. Il cielo, che all'inizio era molto alto, si era come abbassato. Alle nostre spalle stava diventando tutto nero, c'erano nuvole grosse, pesanti, che poggiavano sopra gli alberi, sopra i pali della luce... Una luce violacea spaccò il cielo nero, tuonò più forte. Lila mi diede uno strattone, mi ritrovai poco convinta a correre nella direzione del rione... A nessuna di noi venne in mente di cercarci un riparo.⁵⁸

In "The Cities" the scene is shorter, but similar in the succession of events:

⁵⁶ *Infra*.

⁵⁷ *L'Amica geniale*, 68. *My Brilliant Friend*, 73: "Shortly before the final test in elementary school Lila pushed me to do another of the many things that I would never have had the courage to do by myself. We decided to skip school, and cross the boundaries of the neighborhood..."

⁵⁸ *L'Amica geniale*, 73. *My Brilliant Friend*, 76-77: "I looked more carefully. The sky, which at first had been very high, was as if lowered. Behind us everything was becoming black, large heavy clouds lay over the trees, the light poles... A violet light cracked the black sky, the thunder was louder. Lila gave me a tug, I found myself running, unwillingly, back toward our own neighborhood... It occurred to neither of us to seek shelter."

A un certo punto l'aria diventò nera. Cominciò a piovere, tuoni e lampi, il cielo liquido ci grondò addosso e corse a torrenti verso i tombini. I nostri accompagnatori cercarono un riparo, io e mia sorella no, già vedevo mia madre nervosissima che gridava i nostri nomi dal balcone... Tenevo per mano mia sorella, le gridavo di sbrigarsi, la pioggia ci inzuppava, mi batteva il cuore.⁵⁹

The two sisters, as Elena and Lila, do not even look for shelter, but start running frantically towards home. In both of the scenes, one of the girls is dragging the other in the rain; while Lila drags Elena in the novel, Ferrante would be the one dragging her sister in the scene from *Frantumaglia*. As we will see, the girls' problem, in both of these scenes, is that they have not learnt how to get lost in a city: "imparare a perdersi in città".⁶⁰

A fundamental difference of the two scenes is that, in *Frantumaglia*, Naples is immediately linked to "l'amore possibile";⁶¹ the cause for the children's disobedience to their mother is, in fact, the two little boys' invitation for ice cream. The desire for the boys is here marked by the strange word choice, for two little girls: "prese dal piacere di fare le donna sfrenate"⁶² and also "Ci sentimmo abbandonate sotto la pioggia... I ragazzi ci avevano lasciate al nostro destino".⁶³ Ferrante is here shrewdly creating the background for her theory on women, cities and love. In *My Brilliant Friend*, instead, Lila is the reason for the girls' skipping school and for their exploration of the unknown.

Going back to "The Cities", the children's object of desire then shifts from the little boys to the city itself. So the narrator autobiographically claims that she only wants to get lost

⁵⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 132-133. *Frantumaglia*, 141: "At a certain point the air turned black. It began to rain, with thunder and lightning, the liquid sky dripped down on us and ran in torrents toward the sewers. Our escort looked for shelter, my sister and I didn't: I already saw my mother anxiously shouting our names from the balcony... I held my sister by the hand, shouting at her to hurry, the rain was soaking us, my heart was pounding."

⁶⁰ *La Frantumaglia*, 134. *Frantumaglia*, 143: "Learning to get lost in a city."

⁶¹ *Frantumaglia*, 132. *Frantumaglia*, 141: "the prospect of love".

⁶² *La Frantumaglia*, 132. *Frantumaglia*, 141. "...absorbed by the pleasure of acting like uninhibited women"

⁶³ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 141. "We felt abandoned in the rain, ...the boys had left us to our fate"

in the city; “smarr[irsi]”⁶⁴ and to dissolve in it; “sciogliersi malvagiamente”.⁶⁵ During that disobedient, anxious run for home under the rain, Ferrante felt that the city existed for the first time.

Della città mi accorsi allora per la prima volta. Me la sentii sulle spalle e sotto le scarpe, scappava insieme a noi, ansimava col fiato sporco, lanciava urla pazze di clacson, era estranea e nota insieme, limitata e sconfinata, pericolosa ed eccitante, la riconoscevo smarrendomi.⁶⁶

The girl wants to “smarrirsi”, (not just to “go astray”, but to “blend in”), because this is the only way that she can finally get to know the space surrounding her. Since then, she argues, any city exists only when it gets in the blood that moves her legs and blinds her eyes. “Da quella volta ogni città esiste solo quando bruscamente entra nel sangue che muove le gambe e acceca gli occhi.”⁶⁷ This passage, fraught with hectic emotions, resembles not just the one in *My Brilliant Friend*, but an earlier one; the literary *archè* for what we could call the “flee scene” in Ferrante: *Troubling Love*’s depiction of Delia running under the rain with her uncle, following Caserta and casually stumbling upon Polledro⁶⁸ instead. The osmotic relationship between the protagonists’ feelings in a story and their surrounding spaces is a constant of Ferrante’s narratives. This detail, she claims later in the chapter, is also what mostly struck her in her reading of the story of Dido, in the IV Book of the *Aeneid*.

⁶⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 133 “smarrendomi”. *Frantumaglia*, 141. “...getting lost.”

⁶⁵ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 142. “...wickedly getting lost.” The two ideas of “erring” and “dissolving” into the city can be better understood in the context of Ferrante’s concept of “smarginatura”. *Infra*. “Smarrirsi” in Italian has in fact two meanings: one is that of going astray, the other, implicit in Ferrante’s pun, is that of blending into the realm where one gets lost.

⁶⁶ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 141. “I was aware of the city for the first time. I felt it on my back and under my feet, it was running along with us, panting with its dirty breath, horns honking madly, it was alien and known at the same time, limited and boundless, dangerous and exciting, I recognized it by getting lost.”

⁶⁷ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 141. “Ever since, every city has existed only when it abruptly enters the blood that moves the legs and blinds the eyes.”

⁶⁸ *L’amore molesto*, 88-93. *Troubling Love*, 65-69. In this violently frenzied flee, Delia is running under the rain and she is alternatively following and being followed by three men: Caserta, Polledro and her uncle.

Going back to the wanderings of “The Cities”, Ferrante as a child-Ulysses finds that she wants to wander and, at the same time, to err. In Italian, she is making a pun on the word “errare”, which is both “to err” and “to wander”. In this fragment, Naples is alive and seems to absorb the child’s contrasting emotions, “...lo spazio noto provava anch’esso la mia ansia...”.⁶⁹ These same emotions cause her a spatial realization; the child wants to reach home with her sister but, at the same time, she would like to lose herself in her wanderings, fleeing her mother and her home.

Only when she stops and rationally re-seizes the “filo dell’orientamento”⁷⁰ can she and her sister finally reach home. For Ferrante, ultimately, one has to learn the way to get lost in the city. It is not just the space of the ordering of desire, but that of unruly emotions and chaos: it is what the author calls “città-labirinto”.⁷¹

Ariadne: learning how to get lost

Here Ferrante introduces Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin circa 1900*, directly quoting from the chapter entitled “The TierGarten”.⁷² In his autobiographic work, Benjamin recollects memories of his childhood in Berlin and, especially, his perceiving of the urban space at the time. We now come to the aforementioned “filo dell’orientamento”,⁷³ by the unraveling of the reference to Ariadne. This mythological figure can, for Benjamin and Ferrante, rule conflicting emotions and spatial wandering through the ruse of the thread. Ariadne is the

⁶⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 141. “the known space also felt my anxiety.”

⁷⁰ *La Frantumaglia*, 133. *Frantumaglia*, 142. “the thread of orientation.” This expression also introduces Ariadne’s myth, by means of allusion.

⁷¹ *Supra*.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*, 21.

⁷³ *Supra*.

archetypal figure of someone who has learnt the art of losing herself in a city as completely as she would in a forest and, for that, schooling is needed. Ferrante directly quotes Benjamin: “Non sapersi orientare in una città non vuol dire molto. Ma smarrirsi in essa come ci si smarrisce in una foresta, è una cosa tutta da imparare.”⁷⁴ In this passage, Ferrante interprets both Ariadne’s myth and Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood* as purporting the city-maze as a retraceable locus of childhood and especially of the primary desire for love, outside of the familial household. In Benjamin, the desire unfolds as one for a certain “Ariadne”⁷⁵ of his infancy, while in Ferrante the desire is directed to the boys who invite her and her sister out for ice cream. Perhaps in order to recreate the situation presented in Benjamin’s text, Ferrante began her story with an outside presence (the boys) that pushed the protagonists outside their homes and, especially, outside of their mother’s space of authority. The author thus goes on describing how Ariadne’s myth affected her as an adolescent student and as a writer, when describing Olga’s wanderings in Turin.⁷⁶

The paradox that one has to learn to get lost in a city, without ultimately losing orientation, as in Ariadne’s myth, comes back in *My Brilliant Friend*. Here, Elena thought of Lila as a sort of Ariadne, but realizes she might have overestimated her friend.

...ero sicura che a lei, che da sempre era la prima, fosse tutto chiaro: l’andatura, il computo del tempo a disposizione per andare e tornare, il percorso per arrivare al mare. La sentivo come se avesse tutto ordinato nella testa in modo tale che il mondo intorno non sarebbe riuscito mai a mettere disordine.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 134. *Frantumaglia*, 143: “Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some schooling.” N 6: “Harvard University Press, 2006. Trans Toward Eiland.”

⁷⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*, 21.

⁷⁶ In *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga is abandoned by her husband and lives horrendous days of despair. At one point, she wanders in Turin, trying to take her mind off her pain.

⁷⁷ *L’Amica geniale*, 72. *My Brilliant Friend*, 76: “...I was sure that to her, who had always been first, everything was clear: the pace, the calculation of the time available for going and coming back, the route that would take us to the sea. I felt as if she had everything in her head ordered in such a way that the world around us would never

Unfortunately, however, Lila loses her leadership position during the course of the trip, because she gives in to the fear of getting lost in the city. Ultimately Lila's failing results from her loss of the thread; Elena will instead prove a figure for Ariadne throughout her life. In the course of the *Neapolitan Novels* Elena proves, in fact, able to navigate new spaces and situations without getting lost. Elena's relocations are in fact numerous: from Naples she moves to Pisa, then to Florence, from which she travels to France, Germany, America. Eventually Elena comes back to Naples, where she changes neighborhood and finally moves to Turin. Elena's disposition for travel is accompanied by a strong sense of direction in a literal and metaphorical sense. Lila is instead condemned to live in Naples (or its immediate surroundings) and does not reach the same rational ordering that Elena eventually gets through experience.⁷⁸

Going back to "The Cities", Ferrante then quotes a variant of Ariadne's myth from Graves' *Greek Myths*, where the young pregnant woman is left at Amathus because of Theseus' fear that she might miscarry out of sea-sickness. Interestingly enough, Ferrante lingers on what seems a *hapax* of Classical Literature: according to this variant of the myth, the women of Amathus write love letters to Ariadne, pretending to be Theseus. This is Graves' description of the myth, explicitly referenced by Ferrante in *Frantumaglia*:

s. After long feasting they sailed together for Athens, but were driven to Cyprus by a storm. There Ariadne, already with child by Theseus, and fearing that she might miscarry from sea-sickness, asked to be put ashore at Amathus. This was done, but

be able to create disorder." Elena assimilates Lila to Ariadne more than once in the *Neapolitan Novels*. *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 91: "...provai rabbia per la sua capacità di aggirarsi nei labirinti più deprimenti tenendosi al filo di una sua decisione bellicosa senza darlo a vedere." *The Story of a New Name*, 91: "I was enraged by her capacity to travel through the most depressing labyrinths, holding on to the thread of her declaration of war without showing it."

⁷⁸ *Infra*.

hardly had Theseus regained his ship when a violent wind forced the whole fleet out to sea again. The women of Amathus treated Ariadne kindly, comforting her with letters which, they pretended, had just arrived from Theseus, who was repairing his ship on the shores of a neighbouring island; and when she died in childbed, gave her a lavish funeral...⁷⁹

Via this reference, Ferrante links the importance of women's agency in cities (e.g. Ariadne's thread) to the authorial agency of the women of Amathus. The tradition, in literature, is quite the opposite: men authors would be writing not only *on* women and *about* them, but, most importantly, *as women*. An infamous example of this is Ovid's *Heroides*,⁸⁰ where abandoned heroines write letters to their men voicing their pain and begging them to come back to reclaim them. The most charming detail⁸¹ of Graves' myth consists, for Ferrante, in the women's attempt at writing the letters to Ariadne, where she recognizes at least three main themes:

...lo sforzo femminile per entrare nella testa, nelle parole di un uomo; il collaborare delle donne - un vero affiatato lavoro di gruppo - per fingersi una costituzione psichica e lessicale maschile; l'interrogarsi, al contrario, per cavare fuori da sè cosa avrebbero voluto sentirsi dire da un uomo innamorato...⁸²

⁷⁹ Graves, *Greek Myths*, 98. s.

⁸⁰ Ovid, *Heroides*. Graves' cited myth at Amathus is, in particular, a reversal of Ariadne's letter to Theseus. In Ovid's version, (*Her. X*), Theseus abandons Ariadne at Naxos while she sleeps. Thus, the enamored girl writes him a heart-breaking letter in order to voice her suffering and, hopefully, have him come back and take her back in his life.

⁸¹ Another important detail of Graves' variant of the myth is that of the two dolls owned by Ariadne and Phaedra throughout their lives. *Infra*.

⁸² *La Frantumaglia*, 137. *Frantumaglia*, 146. "... the women's effort to enter the head, the words of a man; the women's collaboration-a true, harmonious group project- to feign a man's psychic and lexical makeup; questioning themselves, on the other hand, to find out what they would have liked to hear from a man in love;..." Another possible source for this idea could be *Menzogna e sortilegio*, (*House of Lies*) by Elsa Morante, where a woman (Anna) is also writing love letters (in this case, to herself) as if she were a man (namely, her dead love Edoardo.)

The first of these themes is opposite to the classic operation of male authors: it is usually the men (as fictional subjects) who make an effort to enter the head of a woman and to speak like she would do. This is, for instance, Ovid's experiment with the *Heroides*. Ultimately, Ferrante proposes a reversal of Classical tradition: women have to learn to think and write *as* men do.⁸³ The writer admits that she has tried to write these letters and thus to envision not only an exclusively feminine community of writers, but also their own city. Ferrante concedes, however, that her attempt failed for two reasons. First, *this* Theseus (or, better, the women's Theseus) was not credible; no woman would have believed that the person writing the letters was a man. Second, the city of women resulted too perfect, stifled in its inauthenticity.

Ricordo che mi piaceva molto immaginare il dibattito rissoso che precedeva la stesura delle lettere. Ma quando cominciai a stenderle davvero, tutto si complicò, mi sembrarono alla fine una fatica inutile, ne scrissi due e poi smisi. Evidentemente l'impianto era debole, le lettere tendevano a tratteggiare un maschio ideale alla cui realtà nessuna Arianna, disperata per l'abbandono, avrebbe mai creduto, soprattutto oggi, la città era troppo perfetta, la comunità femminile pur nella sua vivacità appariva zuccherosamente piena di buoni sentimenti e quindi inautentica.⁸⁴

⁸³ Elena voices the same concern in an extended passage of *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 323: "Scoprivo dappertutto automi di donna fabbricati da maschi. Di nostro non c'era nulla..." *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 354: "I discovered everywhere female automatons created by men. There was nothing of ourselves..."

⁸⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 138. *Frantumaglia*, 146: "I remember that I liked imagining the arguments that preceded the drafting of the letters. But when I began to actually draft them, everything got complicated; in the end they seemed pointless effort—I wrote two and stopped. Evidently the idea was weak, the letters tended to sketch an ideal male in whose reality no Ariadne, however desperate in her abandonment, would have believed, especially today; the city was too perfect; the community of women, even in its vivacity, seemed sentimentally full of good feelings and thus inauthentic."

Here, interestingly, the author is linking the literary effort of the women to write as men to the parallel effort of the women to enter the social construct of the city. Clearly, in her mind, the two problems of geographical and intellectual marginalization of women are deeply connected to one another. All of these philosophical questions arise from her attempt at rewriting a Classical myth and at feigning, in her literary endeavor, to both write and to think as a man.

The issue at stake here is which model should be considered when devising an exclusively feminine city or, even more importantly, one that was founded by a woman. Ferrante in fact notes that, in our culture, a city is always owned by men and even if a woman is born in it, she can never feel that the city is quite *hers*.⁸⁵ In other words, the *polis* was born masculine and struggles to find its feminine nature. Ferrante's question is, ultimately: how would this tentative city look like? What are the models for women's writing/ for the feminine city?

Il problema ... è che si fa fatica a immaginare quale polis potrebbero costruire le donne, cercando di farla a loro immagine e somiglianza. Dov'è l'immagine-modello, somigliante a quali tratti del femminile? Per quel che ne so io la città, per le donne, è sempre d'altri, persino quando è città natale...⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/mar/17/elena-ferrante-even-after-century-of-feminism-cant-be-ourselves>. Although Ferrante does not talk about cities in particular here, she articulates the same struggle that women have to face everyday in order to establish themselves in a men's world. "Even today, after a century of feminism, we can't fully be ourselves, don't belong to ourselves. Our defects, our cruelties, our crimes, our virtues, our pleasure, our very language are obediently inscribed in the hierarchies of the male, are punished or praised according to codes that don't really belong to us and therefore wear us out." See also, *infra*, Irigaray.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: "The problem... is that one has trouble imagining what sort of polis women could construct, if they sought to do so in their image and likeness. Where is the image-model, what female traits would it resemble? As far as I know the city, for women, always belongs to others, even when it's their native city."

One of Ferrante's only certainties about makeups of cities is that, no matter if a "women's only" one, a city should host its labyrinth and its dangerous contradictions,⁸⁷ and one has to learn how to get lost in it, just like Ariadne. It seems that, ultimately, both the irrational and the rational should find their space in it.

Through her analysis of authorial and spatial matters, Ferrante assesses women's marginality in the world. Interestingly, in a pretty conceptual turn, the author sees the text as a space and space as a text:⁸⁸ "Evidentemente la città femminile è lontana da venire e non ha ancora parole vere."⁸⁹ The fact that this city has no words yet to be described enlightens the reader on Ferrante's conception of literature. In this complex passage the author is talking about both real spaces and of fictional ones; but what matters the most is that she is tackling the infamous issue of a feminine language⁹⁰ (versus a masculine one.) In Ferrante's ruminations, the founding of a new feminine city is tantamount to its description by a woman. Through the story of Dido in the *Aeneid*, Ferrante can finally attribute the founding of a city to a woman.

⁸⁷ Calvino, *Invisible Cities*: "The cities and desire", *Infra*.

⁸⁸ The whole concept of *smarginatura*, for example, may well start from the concept of marginalization of women in cities and, contextually, the socio-political-literary ostracism that they suffered throughout history. I believe that the "s" would then constitute a way to operate *against* this marginalization. For the concept of *smarginatura*, see *infra*.

⁸⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 138. *Frantumaglia*, 147: "Evidently the female city will be a long time coming and doesn't yet have true words."

⁹⁰ The fact that she is tackling simultaneously the issue of feminine language and that of feminine space brings back to mind this other passage from the *Neapolitan Novels*. In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Elena considers *Genesis* I, particularly describing the power that *Ish* (Adam) derives from language, while *Isha'h* (Eva) has the problem of not having her own words. I believe there is a connection between this text and *Frantumaglia*, especially for the way that Ferrante describes the polis as being made "a loro immagine e somiglianza"; "in their image and likeness." *Supra. Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 332: "... Il risultato è che *Ish* può dire: questa cosa non è, come l'esercito di tutto ciò che è stato creato, *altro* da me, ma è carne della *mia* carne, ossa delle *mie* ossa. Dio l'ha generata da me... Io sono *Ish* e lei è *Isha'h*. Nella parola innanzitutto, nella parola che la nomina, essa deriva da me che sono a immagine dello spirito divino, che porto dentro il suo Verbo. Lei è dunque un puro suffisso applicato alla *mia* radice verbale, può esprimersi *solo* dentro la *mia* parola." *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 364: "The result is that *Ish* can say: This thing is not, like the army of all that has been created, other than me, but is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones. God produced it from me... I am *Ish* and she is *Isha'h*. In the word above all, in the word that names her, she derives from me. I am in the image of the divine spirit. I carry within me his Word. She is therefore a pure suffix applied to my verbal root, she can express herself only within my word." Cf. Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, 86, *passim*: "...the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects." "Their [i.e., women's] exclusion is *internal* to an order from which nothing escapes: the order of (man's) discourse." Irigaray analyzes the way psychoanalytic language has defined female sexuality, finding that this discourse is a mere acknowledgement of its own domination over the feminine.

Dido: “dux femina facti”

Dido’s reception in Ferrante’s works is intricate: she is in fact referenced many times, but is not interpreted univocally. The author starts from Dido’s reappraisal as a fictional character of Classical literature in *Frantumaglia* and then meta-literarily employs her as a model for the devisal of the main characters in the *Neapolitan Novels*, and for the embodiment of a woman who succeeds in founding Carthage. In the first novel of the tetralogy, Lila introduces Dido to Elena and she will later ponder the importance of the character as a female model for her own life.⁹¹ Through the exegesis of Dido, we will also see which parts of her constitute the failing model of a female protagonist and which, instead, make for the successful one.

Dido has a pivotal role in “Le Città”, constituting a unique paradigm in antiquity: that of a feminine founding myth. In order to convey a well-rounded interpretation of the Virgilian character, Ferrante reads closely from *Aen. I* and *Aen. IV* and gives her own insights on the story. Through the unique example of a woman who was able to found a new city, Ferrante finds a way to resolve the impasse on feminine cities and languages.

Una sola volta, per quel che mi ricordo in questo momento, una donna decide di progettare una sua polis, dirigerne la costruzione, essere “*dux femina facti*”. Si

⁹¹ *L'amica geniale*, 156 ss. *My Brilliant Friend*, 160 ss. *Infra*. On this, see also Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love* 101-127.

tratta ovviamente di Didone, personaggio che però per lungo tempo ho amato solo parzialmente.⁹²

Before plunging into more detail about Ferrante's take of the Virgilian Dido, I am here going to briefly summarize her story in the *Aeneid* and give a context for Ferrante's observations. We will see how her mentioning of the Latin syntagm "*dux femina facti*" is particularly interesting in the context of her discussion on the feminine city and on women's agency in/on literature.

In the first book of the *Aeneid*, Venus tells Aeneas that Dido had loved dearly her husband Sychaeus, but that, tragically, he was then killed by her brother Pygmalion, who was after Sychaeus' wealth. Finally, warned in a dream by her dead husband, Dido leaves Tyre with the treasure that her brother had stolen from Sychaeus and goes off to found a new city.

his commota fugam Dido sociosque parabat.
conueniunt quibus aut odium crudele tyranni
aut metus acer erat ; nauis, quae forte paratae,
corripiunt onerantque auro. Portantur auari
Pygmalionis opes pelago; *dux femina facti*.
deuenere locos ubi nunc ingentia cernes
moenia surgentemque nouae Karthaginis arcem,
mercatique solum, facti de nomine Byrsam,
taurino quantum possent circumdare tergo.⁹³

⁹² *La Frantumaglia*, 139. *Frantumaglia*, 147: "Only once, as far as I remember at the moment, does a woman decide to plan a polis of her own, oversee its construction, be *dux femina facti*. Obviously I am talking about Dido, a character it took me a long time to love completely."

⁹³ *R.A.B. Mynors*, 114. Powell's translation, 47: "Moved by this information, Dido made ready a company for her flight./ Dido and her followers gather, all those who felt a hatred/ or keen fear for the cruel tyrant. They take hold of ships which/ chanced to be ready, and load up the gold. The wealth of greedy/ Pygmalion is carried

(*Aen.* I, vv. 363-368)

In the Virgilian text “*dux femina facti*”, which literally means “the leader of the deed (being) a woman”, is found within the sentence “*Portantur auari/ Pygmalionis opes pelago; ...*”. Dido is the exceptional example of a woman who is the leader of an expedition brought out against a man: she is in fact bringing, while leading the other Tyrians, the *opes* (wealth) that her brother Pygmalion stole to her defunct husband across the sea. It will be noted here that, although Dido decides to do so because Sychaeus spurs her in a dream, she actually becomes the leader of the whole expedition and goes on founding her own city. Finally, we witness a woman who is being the maker of her own (and of her people’s) destiny, deriving her power from her defunct husband, but doing so against another masculine power: that of her brother. I believe that the expression *dux femina facti* is then speaking to Dido’s extraordinary capacity of a leader, while simultaneously being a woman. Surprisingly, commentaries on the expression often notice that the syntagm is peculiar in its epigrammatic nature,⁹⁴ but do not account for the fact that the juxtaposition of the words “*dux*” and “*femina*” is a *hapax* of Roman literature.

Ferrante’s marking of this expression has to be read in conjunction with the unique instance of Carthage as the only city of antiquity to be founded by a woman: “Una sola volta, per quel che mi ricordo in questo momento, una donna decide di progettare una sua polis, dirigerne la costruzione, essere “*dux femina facti*”.”⁹⁵ The author is very well aware of this exceptional happening, especially within a poem like the *Aeneid*; the perpetration and

across the sea. The leader of the expedition/ is a woman. They came to the place where now you see/ the huge walls and the citadel of new Carthage rising. They/ purchased the ground, called ‘Byrsa’ from the name of the deed,/ as much as they could surround with a bull’s hide.” N 403: “*bull’s hide*: The Tyrians purchased as much ground as an oxhide (*byrsa*) would cover. Then they cleverly sliced the hide into thin strips to surround a large area. The story arose from a false etymology: the Phoenicians called their citadel *Bosra*, Semitic for ‘citadel,’ which sounds like the Greek word for oxhide, *byrsa*.”

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Austin, n 364, 133.

⁹⁵ *Supra*.

ultimate realization, for Western imaginary, of the male founding myth.⁹⁶ Ultimately, the *Aeneid* is the long and intricate epic leading to the founding of the biggest empire of all times, one where men's power is never doubted: Rome. Interestingly, in this context, the teleological nature of the epic of the *Aeneid* is questioned by Dido's founding of a city more than it is questioned by the Italian people resisting Aeneas' conquering. When Dido founds Carthage, in fact, she is not yet Aeneas' enemy and this makes her even more threatening for the Roman fate. Among all the obstacles and hindrances that Aeneas finds on its way, Dido and the city of Carthage are quite paramount. These, arguably, constitute women's power over men; love and, in the instance at stake here, culture too. Dido's story is one of the most popular passages of the *Aeneid*, both commentators of Virgil and Ferrante attest to that. As Williams justly points out in his commentary on the *Aeneid*⁹⁷ (and, in particular, on the character of Dido):

The story of Dido has always been the most widely read part of the *Aeneid*, and she has nearly always been favourably portrayed by the many authors and musicians who have been inspired to retell her story, being betrayed by malevolent powers (like the witches in Purcell's opera) or by the heartless Aeneas, though (as Quinn well points out, *Latin Explorations*, p.35) 'those who think ill of Aeneas for deserting Dido are often the same people as those who think ill of Anthony for not deserting Cleopatra.'⁹⁸

Gallippi too has noticed that Ferrante's interest in the story and her passionate reading of the character of Dido might well derive from the fact that this is the best known part of the

⁹⁶ On gender and sexuality in the *Aeneid*, see Oliensis in Martindale 1997, 294-311: "Sons and Lovers: Sexuality and Gender in Virgil's Poetry."

⁹⁷ Williams, *The Aeneid*.

⁹⁸ Williams, 105. Many examples flourish in Italian Literature too and usually follow the reading of a heartless Aeneas and of a victimized Dido, as in Metastasio's *Didone abbandonata*.

Aeneid: “However, the character Lila, through her close reading of Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, suggests that readers concentrate on the episode of the love relationship between Dido and Aeneas.”⁹⁹

However, as much as the author (just like Lila in the *Neapolitan Novels*) likes popularized versions of Classical stories, in “The Cities”, she abstains from the quite facile moralizing judgment over Aeneas, who is often deemed a heartless, mean and, ultimately ruthless man, only wishing to fulfill his own personal goal and, in the larger picture, Rome’s destiny.

Medea and Ariadne as models for Dido

Going back to Dido’s character, as Williams brightly notes “She [*i.e.*, *Dido*] is very much Virgil’s own creation: the legend about her before Virgil seems to have been shadowy in the extreme.”¹⁰⁰ Williams’ pointing out of Virgil’s originality in the devisal of Dido’s character and, more generally, of the whole episode of Book IV is relevant for Ferrante’s thoughts on the heroine. Not only, in fact, does Ferrante pick Virgil’s Dido in particular for her own discussion on women and cities in literature in both *La Frantumaglia* and in the *Neapolitan Novels* but, in the former work, she also links Dido’s character to that of Medea and Ariadne.¹⁰¹ This is very interesting on the exegetic level, because commentaries on the *Aeneid* often point out Virgil’s literary precedents for Dido’s creation: Medea in the *Argonautica* and Ariadne in Catullus’ *Carmina*. Williams carefully goes through these two

⁹⁹ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, *Love*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, 105.

¹⁰¹ *Infra*.

literary precedents of Virgil; respectively, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (Book 3) and Catullus' *Carmen* 64.

Apollonius Rhodius, in Book 3 of his *Argonautica*, set a precedent for the ultimate portrayal of the emotion of love in epic, and there are some verbal and structural similarities between his Medea and Dido (they are ensnared by scheming goddesses, they cannot sleep when all the rest of nature sleeps, they both have recourse to magic). But the Medea of Apollonius is a girl, confused by her emotions, wavering in her attitude: Dido is a mature queen who knows well enough the issues involved, and when she has made up her mind she does not waver from her purpose.¹⁰²

As a matter of fact, Ferrante's interpretation of Dido's character holds a curious resemblance, in its unraveling, to Medea's myth. *The Days of Abandonment*, which the author had just written at the time she wrote "Le Città", is in fact a rewriting of Medea's myth in contemporary terms; an equivalent of Christa Wolf's *Medea*¹⁰³ for the Italian context. In "Le Città" Ferrante is, moreover, connecting the three figures of Ariadne, Dido and Medea via the shared experience of abandonment by their men.¹⁰⁴

The killing of Dido's husband at the hands of her brother, her flight from Tyre and her dexterity in Africa link, in Ferrante's writing, the figures of Medea and Dido. The latter also leaves her motherland because of her husband. However, Dido does so because her brother Pygmalion had killed her husband Sychaeus, Medea does so in order to be with Jason and even helps him to kill her own brother. However intricate these references may be, the two

¹⁰² Williams, 106.

¹⁰³ *Infra*. See, in particular, the explanation of the German concept of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in Lucamante, 86.

¹⁰⁴ The common thread of abandonment reminds Ovid's *Heroides*.

figures share the fact that they have left their birth-place for their husbands and they will then, in return, be abandoned by their respective men and tragically react to this abandonment. Famously, Medea is an *exul*,¹⁰⁵ in that she has to stop speaking a barbarian language and start speaking the language of culture: Greek.

Interestingly, the majority of Ferrante's protagonists follow Medea's model: they leave their motherland in order to follow their men and even to get rid, as *exules*, of their native language; i.e. Neapolitan.¹⁰⁶ This is the case for Delia (*Troubling Love*), Olga (*The Days of Abandonment*) and Leda (*The lost daughter*). The only exception to this is Elena (*Neapolitan Novels*).¹⁰⁷ Elena does not move to Pisa because of her husband's or boyfriend's will, she does so out of her own will to keep on studying and get a prestigious College degree at the Scuola Normale Superiore. However, she also has to abandon the Neapolitan dialect and even change her accent to fit in better in new environments.¹⁰⁸ And while Olga is certainly a figure for Medea, Elena is instead made up from a mixture of different Classical heroines' models: Medea, Ariadne, Dido.

¹⁰⁵ See the fragment (149) that might constitute part of the *Medea exul* by Ennius and, in general, the story of Ennius' tragedy entitled *Medea*. The very beginning of *Heroides* XII also attests to the refugee aspect of Medea: "*Exul inops contempta novo Medea marito...*" "Scornless Medea, the helpless exile (speaks) to her recent husband..."

¹⁰⁶ Lucamante, 86: In her parallel between Olga (*The Days of Abandonment*'s protagonist) and Wolf's Medea, Lucamante notes "Until that summer she has thus repressed her *Napolitanità* and has acquired manners that are not entirely her own in order to fit in with the mentality of the place and please her husband, Mario..." Interestingly, a recent film starring Paola Cortellesi (*Un Boss in salotto*, 2014) presents the similar case of a woman who comes from Naples and, having moved to the more civilized Bolzano, has to cope with her *Napolitanità* as well. As Massimo Troisi's quote goes, "Si dice sempre che Napoli deve cambiare, ma perché non cambiate anche Mantova, Rovigo, Aosta?" Answering to this question would bring us astray, but I would just like to point out here that *Un boss in salotto* hints to the same myth of displacement, -, for marriage, -, of a Mediterranean woman, and to her need to remodel her cultural identity (her accent, her tastes, even her name) because of her husband's decision to live in an allegedly more civilized, richer and more modern place in Northern Italy. Applying this model to the Italian context might also be a way to defy old, trite, racist stereotypes on the primitive, agricultural and criminal South as opposed to an advanced, industrial and honest North.

¹⁰⁷ It should also be noted, tangentially, that all of these protagonists' names, (except for Olga, which is a Russian name), are of Greek origin and figure in Greek mythology.

¹⁰⁸ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 332 *passim*. "Misi il più possibile sotto controllo l'accento napoletano. Riuscii a dimostrare che ero brava e degna di stima..." "Qualcuno era tornato a prendermi in giro per il mio accento napoletano..." *The Story of a New Name*, 332 *passim*. "I kept my Neapolitan accent as much under control as possible. I managed to demonstrate that I was smart and deserving of respect ...", "Some began making fun of my Neapolitan accent again."

We have already described Ariadne's treatment in "Le Città"; one should learn to become an Ariadne in the city, knowing how to get lost in it, without actually losing herself. Williams' commentary on Dido finds that:

In Catullus 64 is told the story of the desertion of Ariadne by Theseus, and again Virgil has used some verbal similarities, especially in the passages of highest pathos (...). But Ariadne is a gentle and pathetically sad heroine who in her devoted love for Theseus would, if he had wished not to marry her, have been his servant and washed his feet. She has no dimension of character like the pride and slighted anger of the queen of Carthage.¹⁰⁹

Ferrante, too, links Dido to Ariadne and does so via the detail of the thread. In her recounting of Dido's story in Africa, she mentions the "filo di Arianna lunghissimo"¹¹⁰ that she will have to handle, in order to circumscribe her land.

Didone era stata china tutta la notte (di notte si fanno i lavori decisivi) a ridurre la pelle di bestia in striscioline quasi invisibili, cucite poi insieme in modo che la cucitura non si potesse nemmeno intuire, un filo di Arianna lunghissimo, un gomito di pelle animale da srotolare per cingere un vasto pezzo di terra d'Africa e, insieme, i confini di una nuova città.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Williams, 106.

¹¹⁰ *La Frantumaglia*, 140. *Frantumaglia*, 148.

¹¹¹ *La Frantumaglia*, 140. *Frantumaglia*, 148: "All night (crucial labors are carried out at night), Dido had been bent over the hide of the beast, reducing it into almost invisible strips, which were then sewed together in such a way that the seams couldn't even be guessed at, a very long Ariadne's thread, a ball of animal skin that would enroll to enclose a vast piece of African land and, at the same time, the boundaries of a new city." Cf. Powell, 47 n 403. *Supra*.

Initially, Ferrante recalls, she did not like the myth,¹¹² because Dido's suicide had spited her: "[mi] aveva indispettita".¹¹³ The author then recounts the story of Dido in Virgil's allusions to her tragic past. These aspects of her past, admittedly, she found most charming in Dido's myth. Ferrante admits that she particularly liked women on the run, then goes on claiming that the reworking of the myth within her own domestic context was feasible only because her mother was a seamstress. This, in short, is the core of the founding myth of Dido: Hiarbas, king of Getulia and son of Jupiter Hammon, proposes to give her the extension of land that is tantamount to a bull's relaxed skin.¹¹⁴

Dido becomes, in these lines, a figure for Ferrante's mother (a seamstress, in the text);¹¹⁵ cutting and sewing the bull's skin professionally. This "filo di Arianna lunghissimo"¹¹⁶ made in order to encompass the borders of a new city is what most fascinates her. Ferrante's disposition towards Dido does not change a bit when she goes to College: she is charmed, not by all of Dido's, but by the woman that is taking on herself the burden of supervising the construction works of Carthage. The way in which Virgil elaborates on Penthesilea's *furens* low relief while recounting Aeneas and Dido's first encounter arouses an emotional response from Ferrante.

In the *Aeneid*, Dido in fact first appears as the hero is contemplating the scene of Penthesilaea engraved in the temple of Juno.

"Ducit Amazonidum lunatis agmina peltis

Penthesilea furens mediisque in milibus ardet,

¹¹² In a similar passage from *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena traces back the story of her own reactions to Virgil's Dido, from the "ginnasio" onwards. For now, I will limit myself to explaining the interpretation of the myth in *Frantumaglia* in order to then move onto the way that the author mentions Dido in *My Brilliant Friend*.

¹¹³ *La Frantumaglia*, 139. *Frantumaglia*, 147. "As a girl I was annoyed by Dido's suicide."

¹¹⁴ *Cf. Aen. I*, 365-68. *Supra*.

¹¹⁵ As promised earlier, I am never going to discuss autobiographic references that Ferrante brings up. It should just be noted here, in a purely literary way, that Amalia, Delia's mother in *Troubling Love* is also a seamstress.

¹¹⁶ *La Frantumaglia*, 140. *Frantumaglia*, 148 and *supra*: "a very long Ariadne's thread."

Aurea subnectens exsertae cingula mammae
 Bella trix, audetque uiris concurrere uirgo.
 Haec cum Dardanio Aeneae miranda uidentur,
 Dum stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno,
 Regina ad templum, forma pulcherrima Dido,
 Incessit magna iuuenum stipante caterua.”¹¹⁷
 (*Aen.* I, vv. 490-497.)

Ferrante admits that her knowing of the tragic end of Dido sheds new light on this detail: she in fact interprets this as an omen of Dido’s fate: from *laeta*¹¹⁸ she will become *furens*¹¹⁹ for Aeneas’ consuming love.

Mi aveva commosso soprattutto che Virgilio la facesse entrare in scena proprio mentre il pio Enea stava contemplando, nel tempio dedicato a Giunone, un bassorilievo che raffigurava una furibonda (*furens*) Penthesilea impegnata in battaglia... Didone faceva la sua prima apparizione, bellissima, circondata da giovani corteggiatori, serenamente attiva, vigile nel regolare l’andamento nei lavori della città, e io, da studentessa-lettrice-traduttrice che già sapeva cosa sarebbe accaduto, a partire da quel momento provavo dolore a ogni parola: mi dispiaceva che quella donna nel pieno della sua femminile vigenza si sarebbe poi consumata per amore furibondo, e da lieta – *laeta*, l’aggettivo adatto a lei – sarebbe diventata

¹¹⁷ *R.A.B. Mynors*, 118. Powell, 52: “The mad Penthesilea/ leads her troops of Amazons with moon-shaped shields, and rages in the midst of her thousands, bound with a golden belt/ beneath her naked breast— a warrior queen, she dares battle,/ a virgin lady fighting with men./ While Dardanian Aeneas/ was looking at these wondrous scenes, while in amazement/ he stared fixed in a single gaze, the queen come to the temple,/ the beautiful Dido, surrounded by a large crowd of youths.”

¹¹⁸ *La Frantumaglia*, 140. *Frantumaglia*, 148-149.

¹¹⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 140. *Frantumaglia*, 148-149.

furiosa come l'altro modello femminile perdente, Penthesilea *firens*. Mi dispiaceva per lei e per la città, che pure stava venendo su promettente.¹²⁰

The word *firens* is normally associated, within a Classical context, to Senecan tragedies, where Hercules (and his many *firentes* descendants), abdicate their will to passions and, at the end of the story, tragically capitulate. This *firens Dido*¹²¹ is, for Ferrante, the losing model of a woman represented by Penthesilaea, a prototype that has not only Dido go to ruin, but the city itself fall under enemy's conquest. Thanks to "l'uso che Virgilio fa della città",¹²² Ferrante's interpretation of Dido undergoes an abrupt change of perspective for her revisal of Olga in *The Days of Abandonment*.

Ma ciò che mi ha colpito veramente è stato l'uso che Virgilio fa della città. Cartagine non è sfondo, non è paesaggio urbano per personaggi e fatti. Cartagine è ciò che non è ancora ma tuttavia sta per diventare, materia in corso d'opera, pietra terremotata di volta in volta dai movimenti interni dei personaggi.¹²³

Now the author suddenly likes Dido "in ogni momento"¹²⁴ and she likes Aeneas, too.

Carthage is not a background, an urban backdrop for characters or facts. The city is, instead, some still totipotent living matter, which is going to be decided, in its outcome, by its

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*: "I was especially struck by the fact that Virgil has her enter just as pious Aeneas, in the temple dedicated to Juno, is contemplating a bas-relief depicting a raging (*firens*) Penthesilea enraged in battle... When she first appears, Dido, who is very beautiful, and escorted by young suitors, is serenely active, vigilantly governing the progress of works in the city, and I, as a student-reader-translator who already knew what would happen, from that moment on suffered at every word: I was sorry that that woman, in the fullness of her female vigor, would be consumed by a mad love, and would be transformed from happy, *lieta*- Virgil's *laeta*, the adjective suited to her- to furious, like the other, losing female model, Penthesilea *firens*. I was sorry for her and for the city, which was also rising auspiciously."

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Frantumaglia*, 149. "Virgil's use of the city."

¹²³ *Ibid.* "But what made the strongest impression was Virgil's use of the city. Carthage isn't a background, isn't an urban landscape for people and events. Carthage is what it has not yet become but is about to be, material that is being worked, stone exploded at times by the internal movements of the two characters."

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* "in every moment."

characters' internal shifts. Carthage, -, just like Naples in the tetralogy-¹²⁵, is portrayed by Ferrante as something which mirrors its characters' interiority, displaying it for the readers/viewers, (the readers are, in fact, at this point, also *viewing* the city.) The text, Ferrante thinks, projects these various feelings into the city and we are left to stand in awe at the wonderful spectacle that the love-story foregrounds. This is, incidentally, exactly what happens when Dido first meets Aeneas: the couple is looking at the engravings on Juno's temple. Now one can detect Ferrante's shrewd overlapping of two viewpoints: that of the reader and that of the two characters looking at the temple and ominously "reading" in it their tragic lovestory.

Cities without love: Carthage, Zobeides, Naples

Here Ferrante goes as far as saying that Aeneas's first feelings are for the city itself and not for Dido; his first admiration goes in fact to the founding of Carthage and its cautious scaffoldings. The author notes that his first sigh is for the Tyrians; they are so lucky, Aeneas thinks, because their walls are already being founded.

Non a caso, prima ancora dell'ammirazione per la bella Didone, Enea ha ammirazione per come ferve il lavoro di edificazione, per come vengono su le mura, la rocca, il porto, il teatro, le colonne. Il suo primo commento è un sospiro:

¹²⁵ We will see, *infra*, how this same "Carthaginian model" will be employed for the description of Naples in its relationship with the protagonists of the *Neapolitan Novels*.

come sono fortunati, i Tirii, le loro mura stanno già sorgendo. In quelle mura lui mette il suo sentimento di rifondatore...¹²⁶

This is a paramount point for Ferrante, one where the admiration for Dido's building of Carthage and the will to found *his own* city create an osmosis with Aeneas' desire for Dido as a woman. As Williams points out in his commentary on Dido: "When Aeneas reaches her city he is amazed at its extent and at the activity going on; she is achieving what he is still far away from."¹²⁷ This is, once again, true at the textual level of the *Aeneid*, but Ferrante is also elaborating on the peculiar conjunction of the body of the woman with the urban corpus of the city. To Ferrante, Carthage is not the trap for the Minotaur,¹²⁸ (and here she resumes her Ariadne's reference), but it is a "polis d'amore".¹²⁹ Dido's feelings are projected onto it and this causes the city's disfigurement. Her love turns in fact into *furor* when her passion for Aeneas explodes¹³⁰ and her city lies unfinished. The *Aeneid* sets this correlation between Dido's feelings for Aeneas, which are inversely proportional to her managerial investment in the building of Carthage.

... est mollis flamma medullas

interea et tacitum uiuit sub pectore uulnus.

uritur infelix Dido totaque uagatur

¹²⁶ *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Frantumaglia*, 149: "Not coincidentally, even before Aeneas admires the beautiful Dido, he admires the bustling activity of the work of the building, the construction of the walls, the fortress, the port, the theater, the columns. His first comment is a sigh: How lucky the Tyrians are, their walls are already rising. Into those walls he puts his feeling as a founder."

¹²⁷ Williams, 106.

¹²⁸ In the myth, Ariadne's mother Pasiphae was said to have copulated with a bull that her husband Minos received as a gift from Poseidon. Out of the monstrous love came the Minotaur; half-human, half-bull. Having consulted the oracle of Delphi, Minos has Daedalus build a labyrinth underneath his palace to keep the monster from eating humans. One day Androgeus, Minos' son, gets killed in a game at Athens. Minos, enraged, attacks Athens and then demands to be sent fourteen young people from the city annually to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Among them is Theseus, who will find his way out of the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur thanks to Ariadne. The girl, enamored of young Theseus, gives him a sword and a ball of thread with which he can both kill the monster and get out of the maze.

¹²⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Frantumaglia*, 149.

¹³⁰ Admittedly, however, poor Dido in the *Aeneid* is being possessed by the Furies.

urbe *furens*, ...
 nunc media Aenean secum per moenia ducit
 Sidoniasque ostentat opes urbam paratam, ...
 non coeptae adsurgunt turres, non arma iuventus
 exercet portusue aut propugnacula bello
 tuta parant: pendent opera interrupta minaeque
 murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo.¹³¹
 (*Aen.* IV, vv. 66-69, 74-75, 86-89.)

In Ferrante's commentary of the *Aeneid* and in other parts of *Frantumaglia*, the city and the woman overlap: they become, for Aeneas (and, generally, for the men) a "città-bella donna, da possedere."¹³² Naples can be a "donna-città",¹³³ a "polis d'amore",¹³⁴ or a "sirena perversa",¹³⁵ but it can also become a "labirinto",¹³⁶ a "città-labirinto".¹³⁷ The feminine constitution of the city is finally taking shape in *Frantumaglia*: it is a city-woman body that can, depending on who is trying to conquer it, become a trap for its chasers.

This allusion is tied, again, to Ferrante's concept of the city without love as being unjust and cruel. In "*La città senza amore. Risposte alle domande di Goffredo Fofi*",¹³⁸ the author in fact points out that: "La città senza amore è una città ingiusta e crudele."¹³⁹ In *My*

¹³¹ Powell, 121: "In the meanwhile/ her tender marrow was aflame, and a silent wound lives in her heart. Unhappy Dido is burning up, and she wanders through the whole city/ in a delirium, ... Now Dido leads Aeneas with her around the walls, and she shows/ him the riches of SIDON and the city she has built.../The building of the towers, though begun, now stopped. The youths/ no longer drill, or prepare the port and the battlements to make them safe/ for war. Works interrupted just hang there, and the huge threatening walls,/ and the construction cranes reaching to the sky."

¹³² *La frantumaglia*, 141. *Frantumaglia*, 149. "City-beautiful woman, to be possessed."

¹³³ *La Frantumaglia*, 62. *Ibid.*, 67 "woman-city."

¹³⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 141. *Ibid.*, 150: "polis of love."

¹³⁵ *La Frantumaglia*, 61. *Ibid.*, 66: "a perverse siren."

¹³⁶ *La Frantumaglia*, 61. *Ibid.*, 66: "labyrinth."

¹³⁷ *La Frantumaglia*, 138. *Ibid.*, 146: "city-labyrinths."

¹³⁸ *La Frantumaglia*, 71. *Frantumaglia*, 76. *Supra*. "The City Without Love. Answers to questions from Goffredo Fofi."

¹³⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 72. *Frantumaglia*, 77. *Supra*. "The city without love is an unjust and cruel city."

Brilliant Friend, when Lila first introduces Dido's character to Elena, in *quarta ginnasio*,¹⁴⁰ she also says that: "Se non c'è amore, non solo inaridisce la vita delle persone, ma quella delle città."¹⁴¹ It will be noted here that Lila too, -, just like the author does in *Frantumaglia*, -, is tying Dido to the concept of the city without love as being a failure for humanity. It seems like this is a constant in Ferrante's conception of cities and especially in her interpretation of Dido's story in the *Aeneid*. In the tetralogy, Dido is named in the first and second books; firstly by Lila, then by Elena who writes a paper on Dido's episode in high school. Finally, for her Bachelor of Arts' thesis at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Elena works on the fourth book of the *Aeneid*. After Lila has connected Dido's episode in the *Aeneid* to her conception of a city without love, Elena starts reflecting on the meaning of this and thinks to herself:

Non mi ricordo come si espresse di preciso, ma il concetto era quello, e io lo associai alle nostre strade sporche, ai giardinetti polverosi, alla campagna scempiata dai palazzi nuovi, alla violenza in ogni casa, in ogni famiglia...¹⁴²

Elena is now applying the abstract concept of a city without love to her own reality and, i.e., to the state's negligence, post-war reconstruction and also to the widespread violence within the neighborhood's families. After these reflections, Elena writes a paper for her Latin Literature class in high school, entitled: "Le varie fasi del dramma di Didone"¹⁴³ and has a great success not just with her own professor, but with the whole school. Even Professor Galiani, a pretty strict professor, finds her idea of a city without love very interesting and wants to know more of Elena's thoughts on the issue.

¹⁴⁰ First year of *Liceo Classico*.

¹⁴¹ *L'amica geniale*, 156. *My Brilliant Friend*, 160. "When there is no love, not only the life of the people becomes sterile but the life of cities."

¹⁴² *L'amica geniale*, 156. *My Brilliant Friend*, 160. "I don't remember exactly how she expressed it, but that was the idea, and I associated it with our dirty streets, the dusty gardens, the country-side disfigured by new buildings, the violence in every house, every family..."

¹⁴³ *L'amica geniale*, 183. *My Brilliant Friend*, 187. "The Various Phases of the Tragedy of Dido."

Una professoressa della prima A, per esempio, la professoressa Galiani che tutti apprezzavano e tutti schivavano perché aveva fama di essere comunista e con due battute riusciva a smontare ogni argomentazione mal fondata, mi fermò nell'atrio e si entusiasmò soprattutto per l'idea, centrale nel mio compito, che se l'amore è esiliato dalle città, le città mutano la loro natura benefica in natura maligna. Mi chiese: «Che significa per te “una città senza amore”?». «Un popolo privato della felicità». «Fammi un esempio». Pensai alle discussioni che avevo fatto con Lila e Pasquale per tutto settembre e le sentii all'improvviso come una vera scuola, più vera di quella che facevo tutti i giorni. «L'Italia sotto il fascismo, la Germania sotto il nazismo, tutti quanti noi esseri umani nel mondo d'oggi.»¹⁴⁴

In this passage, Elena suddenly manifests a profound civic and political conscience, seeing in this lack of love one of the reasons for people's unhappiness and for the advent of Fascism and Nazism. Gallippi's article has shown that this conception can be drawn from Serao's oeuvre on the city of Naples and love, but I believe there might another unexplored connection in this realm.

In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*,¹⁴⁵ we come across a very similar concept of a “città-bella donna, da possedere”¹⁴⁶ which becomes a trap for the men who chase her. *Invisible cities* (1972) is a collection of short stories framed by a conversation on abstract themes (life, death, desire, memory, imagination) between Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan. Polo

¹⁴⁴ L'amica geniale, 184. *My Brilliant Friend*, 188. “For example, Professor Galiani, a woman who was highly regarded and yet avoided, because she was said to be a Communist, and because with one or two comments she could dismantle any argument that did not have a solid foundation, stopped me in the hall and spoke with particular admiration about the idea, central to my paper, that if love is exiled from cities, their good nature becomes an evil nature. She asked me: ‘What does a ‘city without love mean to you?’ ‘A people deprived of happiness.’ ‘Give me an example.’ I thought of the discussions I’d had with Lila and Pasquale in September and I suddenly felt that they were a true school, truer than the one I went to everyday. ‘Italy under Fascism, Germany under Nazism, all of us human beings in the world today.’”

¹⁴⁵ *Le città invisibili*.

¹⁴⁶ *Supra*.

describes to the Khan 55 cities of his always-increasing empire, so that he can get to know his realm better. The first story from the third chapter of the book is called “Cities and Desire”¹⁴⁷ and it tells the story of Zobeides,¹⁴⁸ the “città bianca.”¹⁴⁹ Zobeides is a strange city, because some men from different countries have made it after a dream they all had. They dreamed that they were chasing a naked, longhaired woman running through a city. In the end, she would escape them. These men have thus looked for this city everywhere, but have not found it; instead, they found each other. Thus, the men decide to build the city of Zobeides after their communal dream and try to entrap the woman exactly in the place of the city where, in the dream, she had escaped them. Calvino points out that, since they built the city, no one was actually able to see this woman again, neither in dreaming, nor in wake and thus nobody even thinks of her anymore. New men with the same dream come to Zobeides and decide to change the structure of the city in order to entrap the dreamed woman in the place where she vanished. No one is actually able to do this and the founders of the city, at the end of the story, even wonder why do new people come to Zobeides; it is in fact an ugly creation; a trap.

Questo si racconta della sua fondazione: uomini di nazioni diverse ebbero un sogno uguale, videro una donna correre di notte per una città sconosciuta, da dietro, coi capelli lunghi, ed era nuda. Sognarono d’inseguirla. Gira gira ognuno la perdette. Dopo il sogno andarono cercando quella città; non la trovarono ma si trovarono tra loro; decisero di costruire una città come nel sogno. Nella disposizione delle strade ognuno rifece il percorso del suo inseguimento; nel punto in cui aveva perso le tracce della fuggitiva ordinò diversamente che nel sogno gli spazi e le mura in modo che non gli potesse più scappare... I primi arrivati non

¹⁴⁷ *Le città invisibili*, 51. *Invisible cities*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ See also *One Thousand and One Nights*, Vol.1, 15. “The story of Zobeides”.

¹⁴⁹ *Le città invisibili*, 51. *Invisible cities*, 39.

capivano che cosa attraesse questa gente a Zobeide, in questa brutta città, in questa trappola.¹⁵⁰

The ideas that the city-woman is a dream (or, better a desire) of the men, that they try to chase her but she vanishes, that it actually becomes a trap for them are all shared by Ferrante in her writings. Myths about the city of Naples deal with the siren Parthenope, who vanished on the island of Megaride and ended up giving her name to the city and the greater Neapolitan area. Furthermore, Ferrante's observations on Dido and Carthage are comparable to the idea of a city that, without love, turns against itself and becomes an inescapable trap for anyone who treads it. The problematic desire of the men of Zobeides is unchecked; in Virgilian terms, this is *furor*. Consequently, this dream/desire can only destroy the city and ultimately transform it into a labyrinth, an ugly and unjust trap for the men. This is, in a nutshell, Ferrante's interpretation of Dido's story; Carthage is a city and, at the same time, a beautiful woman and Aeneas wants it as much as he wants Dido. Her *furor* will lead her to suicide and the city to finally perish.

Moreover, the idea that the streets, in Zobeides, are wound about themselves as in a skein, "... con vie che girano su stesse come in un gomito" ¹⁵¹ is also something that we come across in Ferrante's description of Ariadne's maze and Benjamin's Berlin in *Frantumaglia*. Going back to that passage, Ferrante quotes Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood circa 900*, where: "i labirinti... arabescavano le carte assorbenti dei miei quaderni." ¹⁵²

Ferrante thus interprets and paraphrases Benjamin: "una scrittura a gorgo, ... i ghirigori delle

¹⁵⁰ *Le città invisibili*, 53. *Invisible Cities*, 39. "They tell this tale of its foundation: men of various nations had an identical dream. They saw a woman running at night through an unknown city; she was seen from behind, with long hair, and she was naked. They dreamed of pursuing her. As they twisted and turned, each of them lost her. After the dream they set out in search of that city; they never found it, but they found one another; they decided to build a city like the one in the dream. In laying out the streets, each followed the course of his pursuit; at the spot where they had lost the fugitive's trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she would be unable to escape again... The first to arrive could not understand what drew these people to Zobeide, this ugly city, this trap."

¹⁵¹ *Le città invisibili*, 51. *Invisible cities*, 39. "...with streets wound about themselves as in a skein."

¹⁵² *La Frantumaglia*, 135. *Frantumaglia*, 143. "labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks."

carte assorbenti,... *penoso e inestricabile, ...*”¹⁵³ tying the object of writing: the primary labyrinth of infancy to its tool. Writing itself becomes then a vortex, or a ball, which has to be unraveled. Clearly, Ferrante is here elaborating Benjamin’s conjunction between the spatial labyrinth and its mirroring on paper; a vortex-like writing. The overall metaphor that Ferrante and Benjamin are describing is, however, that of the thread’s ball that Ariadne holds in its hands and gradually unravels, in order to bring Theseus to salvation outside the labyrinth and away from the monstrous Minotaur. The “gomitolo”¹⁵⁴ thus comes back with renewed force in Ferrante through Calvino and Benjamin, constituting both the overriding metaphor for her own rewriting of the myth of Ariadne and for writing itself, in general. Space and text are, once again, deeply intertwined, through a complex and rather fascinating combination of sources.

As we have seen, “Le Città” is a literary and metaliterary complex chapter of *Frantumaglia*, where Ferrante brings together her knowledge of Classical Greek and Latin literature, interspersing the text with possible quotations from Italian authors, too. The purpose of the author, however, is that of finding a variant to Dido’s story, one where, perhaps, the heroine finds contentment on multiple levels. Elena from the *Neapolitan Novels* and Ferrante’s protagonists, in general, embody the overcoming of Dido’s (as well as Ariadne’s and Medea’s)¹⁵⁵ self-annihilation consequent to their partner’s abandonment. This, we have seen, is linked to their ability to orient themselves through urban spaces and coordinate their endeavors in the literary world.

In the *Neapolitan Novels*, Ferrante instantiates her theory of a city without love into Naples, although she makes only gradual and scattered references to this same concept. In the third book of the series, there is a very long passage on the nature of Naples as a city that

¹⁵³ *La Frantumaglia*, 134-135. *Frantumaglia*, 142-143. “a vortex-like writing,... the squiggles on the blotting paper,... *difficulties and impracticalities...*”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, “the ball.”

¹⁵⁵ It will be noted, in fact, that in some variants of the myth of Ariadne, she tragically hangs herself after Theseus’ abandonment. See Graves, 98-99.

erodes itself from within because of man's carelessness and vice. Ferrante expands her analysis from the neighborhood to the city of Naples to Italy, Europe and the whole world in a terrible, almost apocalyptic progression. These passages will elucidate what is the meaning, in a modern context, of a city, -, and even a world, -, without love.

In the period that Elena comes back from Pisa to Naples, she starts feeling a physiological malaise sliding from the neighborhood to the whole city.

In quel periodo mi convinsi che non c'era grande differenza tra il rione e Napoli, il malessere scivolava dall'uno all'altra senza soluzione di continuità. A ogni ritorno trovavo una città sempre più di pastafrolla, che non reggeva i cambi di stagione, il caldo, il freddo, soprattutto i temporali.¹⁵⁶

The city is “spineless” and the precarious conditions of its buildings stand for the moral corruption of its inhabitants. People actually die from carelessness, decadence, and oppression. What Elena finds the more striking, however, is that this same subjected people are forced by their living conditions to perpetually vote for the wrong candidates and blindly repeat the same mistakes of the past.

Le fogne sovraccariche schizzavano, sbavavano. Lave d'acqua e liquami e immondizia e batteri si rovesciavano nel mare dalle colline cariche di costruzioni nuovissime e fragili, o erodevano il mondo di sotto. La gente moriva d'incuria, di

¹⁵⁶ *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 17. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 25: “During that period I was convinced that there was no great difference between the neighborhood and Naples, the malaise slid from one to the other without interruption. Whenever I returned I found a city that was spineless, that couldn't stand up to changes of season, heat, cold, and, especially, storms.”

corruzione, di sopraffazione, e tuttavia, a ogni tornata elettorale, dava il suo consenso entusiastico ai politici che le rendevano la vita insopportabile.¹⁵⁷

Moreover, Elena finds that the city gets worse and worse, every year. Naples seems to contain a sort of fury, which does not cease until it destroys itself. The city is described again as violent, unlivable and as if hosting a sort of perpetual, unconscious war against every visitor, stranger and even against its own citizens.

Ogni anno, insomma, mi pareva peggio. In quel periodo di piogge, la città si era ancora una volta crepata, un intero palazzo si era piegato su un fianco come una persona che si appoggia al bracciolo tarlato di una vecchia poltrona e il bracciolo cede. Morti, feriti. E grida, mazzate, bombe carta. Pareva che la città covasse nelle viscere una furia che non riusciva a venir fuori e perciò la erodeva, o erompeva in pustole di superficie, gonfie di veleno contro tutti, bambini, adulti, vecchi, gente di altre città, americani della Nato, turisti d'ogni nazionalità, gli stessi napoletani. Come si poteva resistere in quel posto di disordine e pericolo, in periferia, al centro, sulle colline, sotto il Vesuvio?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 17. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 25-26. "The clogged sewers splattered, dribbled over. Lavas of water and sewage and garbage and bacteria spilled into the sea from the hills that were burdened with new, fragile structures, or eroded the world from below. People died of carelessness, of corruption, of abuse, and yet, in every round of voting, gave their enthusiastic approval to the politicians who made their life unbearable."

¹⁵⁸ *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 18-19. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 27. "Every year, in other words, it seemed to me worse. In that season of rains, the city had cracked yet again, an entire building had buckled onto one side, like a person who, sitting in an old chair, leans on the worm-eaten arm and it gives way. Dead, wounded. And shouts, blows, cherry bombs. The city seemed to harbor in its guts a fury that couldn't get out and therefore eroded it from the inside, or erupted in pustules on the surface, swollen with venom against everyone, children, adults, old people, visitors from other cities, Americans from NATO, tourists of every

The last time Elena sees Lila, in 2005, the two aged women talk about this condition of corruption that does not encompass Naples only, but ends up taking over the whole planet. Elena states that Lila was right from the beginning about this and that her never leaving Naples was actually a good idea. By traveling and moving to different places in fact, Elena has only confirmed what Lila had understood since she was a child.

Me l'ero battuta infatti. Ma solo per scoprire, nei decenni a venire, che mi ero sbagliata, che si trattava di una catena con anelli sempre più grandi: il rione rimandava alla città, la città all'Italia, l'Italia all'Europa, l'Europa a tutto il pianeta. E oggi la vedo così: non è il rione a essere malato, non è Napoli, è il globo terrestre, è l'universo, o gli universi. E l'abilità consiste nel nascondere e nascondersi lo stato vero delle cose. Ne parlai con Lila quel pomeriggio, nell'inverno del 2005, con enfasi e come per fare ammenda. Volevo riconoscerle che aveva capito tutto fin da ragazzina, senza mai muoversi da Napoli.¹⁵⁹

We will remember that Elena has started to think about these issues only when Lila told her about her reading of Dido's story as that of a city without love, in *My Brilliant Friend*.

nationality, the Neapolitans themselves. How could one endure in that place of disorder and danger, on the outskirts, in the center, on the hills, at the foot of Vesuvius?"

¹⁵⁹ *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 19-20. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 28. "I had fled, in fact. Only to discover, in the decades to come, that I had been wrong, that it was a chain with larger and larger links: the neighborhood was connected to the city, the city to Italy, Italy to Europe, Europe to the whole planet. And this is how I see it today: it's not the neighborhood that's sick, it's not Naples, it's the entire earth, it's the universe, or universes. And shrewdness means hiding and hiding from oneself the true state of things. I talked about it with Lila that afternoon, in the winter of 2005, emphatically and as if to make amends. I wanted to acknowledge openly that she had understood everything since she was a girl, without ever leaving Naples."

«Se non c'è amore, non solo inaridisce la vita delle persone, ma anche quella delle città». Non mi ricordo come si espresse di preciso, ma il concetto era quello, e io lo associavo alle nostre strade sporche, ai giardinetti polverosi, alla campagna scempiata dai palazzi nuovi, alla violenza in ogni casa, in ogni famiglia.¹⁶⁰

The theme of a “city without love” and of Serao’s “Sventramento,” instead of a “Risanamento”¹⁶¹ come back in *Frantumaglia*, when Ferrante explains the protagonists’ vision of Naples in the *Neapolitan Novels*. Elena and Lila’s opinions overlap with those of the author, who makes similar claims to those we have explored.

Per Lila e Lena, Napoli è la città dove la bellezza si rovescia in orrore, dove le buone maniere si mutano in pochi secondi in violenza, dove ogni Risanamento copre uno Sventramento. A Napoli si impara subito a non fidarsi, ridendo, sia della Natura che della Storia. A Napoli il progresso è sempre progresso di pochi a danno dei più. Ma, come vede, di passaggio in passaggio non stiamo più parlando di Napoli, ma del mondo. Ciò che chiamiamo progresso illimitato è il grande crudele scialo delle classi agiate dell’Occidente. Le cose forse andranno un po’ meglio quando gli preferiremo la cura dell’intero pianeta e di ogni suo abitante.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ *L’amica geniale*, 156. *My Brilliant Friend*, 160. “When there is no love, not only the life of the people becomes sterile but the life of cities.” I don’t remember exactly how she expressed it, but that was the idea, and I associated it with our dirty streets, the dusty gardens, the countryside disfigured by new buildings, the violence in every house, every family.”

¹⁶¹ *Supra*.

¹⁶² *La Frantumaglia*, 233. *Frantumaglia*, 242. “For Lila and Lena, Naples is the city where beauty spills over into horror, where good manners can be instantly transformed into violence, where every Reclamation claims a Demolition. In Naples one learns immediately to distrust, laughing all the while, both Nature and History. In Naples progress is always the progress of the few to the detriment of the many. But, as you see, we are speaking no longer of Naples but of the world. What we call unlimited progress, for example, is the great cruel

This passage finally clarifies the modern meaning of a city without love. The purported healing of the city is tantamount, in reality, to its gutting. Ferrante's words seem to address blind capitalistic investments and rebuilding of the city that, while feigning good intentions (i.e., that of healing the city from cholera, or to generally give it a new face) really hide the terrible exploitation of humans and resources, sought out just in order to make more and more profit. By an expansion of her analysis to the whole world, Ferrante also hints to possible ecological solutions. This thought, however, is also suggesting the need for renewed care and respect not just for nature, but also for the whole of humanity.

squandering of the wealthy classes of the West. Things may go a bit better when we prefer to take care of the entire planet and each of its inhabitants." This passage resembles in style and content Anna Maria Ortese's interviews on similar issues. See, for instance, *In Sonno e in Veglia*. "Piccolo Drago (Intervista)", 163.

Chapter II: The ‘Genius Friend’ and the *Genius (Loci)*

«No, non finire mai: te li do io i soldi, devi studiare sempre». Feci un risolino nervoso, poi dissi: «Grazie, ma a un certo punto le scuole finiscono». «Non per te: tu sei la mia amica geniale, devi diventare la più brava di tutti, maschi e femmine». Si alzò, si tolse mutande e reggiseno, disse: «Dài, aiutami, che sennò faccio tardi». ¹⁶³

This chapter focuses on the etymological meanings of the titular *geniale* and of the related term *genio*. Importantly, the Italian edition uses *L’Amica Geniale*, (literally, *The Genius Friend*) as both the title of the first book of the series and as a comprehensive one for the whole collection. I posit that the author’s use of the words *geniale* and *genio* can only be fully understood in relation to their Latin etymology: *genialis* and *genius*. These Classical concepts come to life, in the modern context of the novel, through their employment by the two protagonists. The Latin etymology of the Italian words is revitalized by Ferrante’s profound knowledge of Classical culture and literature. As I have showed in my first chapter, via the analysis of a passage from *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante’s works are profoundly imbued in Classical models. In my second chapter I am going to confirm this at the textual level.

Following my critique, Lila can be interpreted as an instantiation of the *genius*¹⁶⁴ of Elena and, relatedly, as a *genius loci* for the city of Naples. My interpretation, furthermore, configures the two protagonists’ friendship as a mutual, reciprocal mirroring of beings and of

¹⁶³ *L’Amica geniale*, 308-309. *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, 312. “No, don’t ever stop: I’ll give you the money, you should keep studying.” I gave a nervous laugh, then said, “Thanks, but at a certain point school is over.” “Not for you: you’re my brilliant friend, (*in the Italian: la mia amica geniale*), you have to be the best of all, boys and girls.” She got up, took off her underpants and bra, said, “Come on, help me, otherwise I’ll be late.”

¹⁶⁴ *Infra*.

destinies. While offering new Classical readings of *genius* and *genialis*, my argument builds on the previous work of Ferrante scholars, including Daniela Brogi,¹⁶⁵ Franco Gallippi¹⁶⁶ and Rebecca Falkoff.¹⁶⁷

I will elaborate on Brogi's observations on the use of *genio* in the Neapolitan dialect and her reference to the idea of *geniale* as a sign of the reciprocity of destinies that the protagonists share. I will thus shed light on the etymological resonance of *genius* and *genialis* in the context of the novels. This, along with the numerous, scattered references to the Classical world, elucidates that Ferrante's work is more imbued in this tradition than previously noted.

Gallippi's findings¹⁶⁸ likewise prove important for my interpretation of Lila as *genius* and, ultimately, as *genius loci* of Naples. In his work, Gallippi posits that the myths at the core of the Neapolitan setting of the novels is that of Virgil and Parthenope. In a Neapolitan cultural context, the Virgilian myth is highly renowned on a popular level, because of the topographical legends surrounding Virgil and Castel Dell'Ovo,¹⁶⁹ along with Matilde Serao's¹⁷⁰ description of the city as one and the same with the mythical Parthenope, i.e., love.¹⁷¹ Gallippi thus sees Lila as a possible figure for Parthenope and for the "founding of a new city",¹⁷² where love will have a pivotal role. I agree with Gallippi's identification of Lila with Parthenope and I will expand this idea, finally showing that Lila can be seen as the *genius* in all of its etymological complexity, from the *genius* of Elena to the *genius loci* of Naples, because of her constitution as an inherently Classical character.

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=13515>

¹⁶⁶ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love, 101-128. *Supra*.

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>

¹⁶⁸ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love, 101-128.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁷⁰ Serao, 26, 42.

¹⁷¹ In the myth, Parthenope is a siren who, from the island of Megaride, attempts to enchant Ulysses with her singing; the tragic end sees Parthenope disappearing and blending into the geographical area of the bay, constituting, for Serao, a sort of symbol for the city. *Supra*.

¹⁷² Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love, 104.

Although my focus is on the Classical presence in the *Neapolitan Novels*, my comparative approach owes a debt to Rebecca Falkoff's criticism. This is particularly true for my analysis of Ferrante's interweaving of the concepts of *genius* and *genialis* into a twentieth-century plot.¹⁷³ Rebecca Falkoff was one of the first scholars to address Ferrante's German sources. Stefania Lucamante already assessed the importance of Christa Wolf's *Medea* for Ferrante's writing of *The Days of Abandonment*, citing the German concept of "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'the process of getting over the past'"¹⁷⁴ representing a present condition through means of Classical myths. Lucamante argues that in her 2002 novel Ferrante establishes a connection between her protagonist (Olga) and Wolf's *Medea*, corroborating the importance of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through the "immemorial"¹⁷⁵ allusion to the Classical myth of Medea. Spurred by these findings and by the German (and Wolfean) concept of 'getting over the past', Falkoff¹⁷⁶ also proceeded in a similar direction with her research on Ferrante. In her article "To Translate is To Betray: On the Elena Ferrante Phenomenon in Italy and the US",¹⁷⁷ she bases her comparative understanding of the *Neapolitan Novels* on the identification of Elena Ferrante with translator Anita Raja.¹⁷⁸ In her groundbreaking work, Falkoff has in fact shown how Raja's translation of Christa Wolf's oeuvre, and, in particular, of her novel *The Quest for Christa T.* proved crucial in the devisal of Lila and Elena's problematic relationship. In Wolf's novel, the narrator Christa and her "genius friend" Christa T. are similarly tied to one another, and the narration is also triggered by the narrator's will to find her best friend. For the purpose of my current research, I will not be retracing Wolf's influence on Ferrante.¹⁷⁹ Rather, I try to demonstrate that this same

¹⁷³ *Infra*.

¹⁷⁴ Lucamante, 86.

¹⁷⁵ Lucamante, 86.

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>

¹⁷⁸ As Falkoff has written, the identification of the author with Anita Raja should not constitute a mere mediatic curiosity, but, academically speaking, it should be employed to shed light on Ferrante's German literary sources.

¹⁷⁹ For Wolf's influence on Ferrante see Lucamante 2008.

doubling, mirroring and mutual emulation in life, is a literary image Ferrante transforms and enhances through engagement with Classical sources.

Genius in genio and geniale

Elena Ferrante's interest in the Classics is deep, and her works¹⁸⁰ are marked by recurring references to the Classical world. In fact, the tetralogy's protagonist Elena Greco¹⁸¹ attends the "Liceo Classico", a high school that concentrates on ancient Greek and Latin. Moreover, in the course of the series, we see how Elena's *penchant* for the Classics is substantially boosted by her decision to study at the Scuola Normale Superiore, in Pisa. As early as elementary school, both Lila and Elena want to learn Latin, which will come to represent, for Lila, a marker of identitarian difference between her and Elena. Lila will not be able to attend middle school, because of her parents' decision not to invest their money in her preparation for the (Latin) admission test. Interestingly, in the books, not only is Italian deemed a better standard than Neapolitan dialect, but also Latin (and, further on, Greek) comes to symbolize Elena's upward social mobility, through her control of the ancient world's language and culture. In Italy, however, connotations of class distinction have always been attached to the mastery of the Classics. In the *Neapolitan Novels* this is a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of Italian cultural prejudices in the decades that span from the fifties to our own time. Maestra Oliviero, blinded by this cultural prejudice, will disregard Lila from the moment her parents decide not to invest in her future as a student, denying her

¹⁸⁰ *Supra*. In my first chapter I have shown how Classical influence proved consistent and weighing on Ferrante's protagonists.

¹⁸¹ In English not quite "Hellen the Greek", but "Hellen Greek"; (masculine). The protagonist's name also shows the author's interest that the Classics be an agential part of the story.

the possibility of going to middle school and start learning Latin. Moreover, although the girl fulfills great goals in educating herself, like that of reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*,¹⁸² Maestra Oliviero will never understand Lila's authentic and profound desire to keep on studying. Elena will have, instead, a different fate, one that is also decided by Lila's symbolic investiture of Elena as the "amica geniale", in the scene that gives the title to the Italian series.

The adjective "geniale", in fact, is part of the Italian title *L'Amica geniale* and there are only two instances, in the series, where we encounter the syntagm "amica geniale." These occurrences mark two central scenes in the novels. In the first one, Lila metaphorically initiates her best friend to a new time of her life, in a highly symbolical (and titular) act, defining Elena her "amica geniale."¹⁸³ Readers, having followed the story of this friendship through Elena's eyes, are shocked as much as she is in hearing this, because they share Elena's sense of inferiority towards Lila. In other words, everyone at this point is convinced that the brilliant friend of the title is Lila and not Elena.

«Grazie, ma a un certo punto le scuole finiscono». «Non per te: tu sei la mia amica geniale, devi diventare la più brava di tutti, maschi e femmine».¹⁸⁴

In this groundbreaking scene, by entrusting Elena with the title of "amica geniale", Lila has decided her future, granting her friend a life of study and success. In other words, Lila would have wanted to have all that Elena eventually gets, but, because she cannot, she decides to

¹⁸² "Is it about the Odyssey?" asks maestra Oliviero to an adult Lila. *The Story of a New Name: Neapolitan Novels, Book Two*, 380.

¹⁸³ *L'amica geniale*, 308-309. *My Brilliant Friend*, 312.

¹⁸⁴ *L'Amica geniale*, 308-309. The English translation of "geniale" with "brilliant", while accurate on the level of meaning, fails on the etymological and semantic one. *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, 312. "Thanks, but at a certain point school is over." "Not for you: you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls."

abide by the rules that her social environs dictate and at least find some satisfaction in seeing her friend's burgeoning humanistic (and, eventually, literary) talent.¹⁸⁵

The second occurrence of the syntagm is an explicatory repetition of this scene in the last book of the series, where Elena admits that, ultimately, she is what Raffaella Cerullo has defined, more than once, "l'amica geniale". At this stage in the novel, Elena and Raffaella are in their sixties and live, respectively, in Turin and Naples, only sporadically calling each other on the phone. Yet Elena is having a great self-esteem crisis and she has the suspicion that Lila is instead writing the best book on Naples that has ever been written. In her obsessive refrain on her own incapability as a writer, Elena cannot help it but think of Lila as the one who should have been writing and having success, because, -, no doubt, -, she would have done it better. "Ero ciò che Lila stessa, ora per scherzo, ora sul serio, aveva spesso ripetuto: Elena Greco, l'amica geniale di Raffaella Cerullo. Da quel rovesciarsi improvviso delle sorti sarei uscita annientata."¹⁸⁶ Elena's annihilation as a writer thus resulted "Da quel rovesciarsi improvviso delle sorti." In the first titular scene of the series, Lila had invested Elena with the title of "amica geniale" and we now discover that Elena experienced that as an "unexpected reversal of destinies."¹⁸⁷

I would argue that precisely this exchange in fates is the essential meaning of the title and, contextually, of the relationship between the two friends throughout the series. My theory finds support in etymology; "geniale" and "genio" share in fact the same Latin root:

¹⁸⁵ Almost at the end of the novel, Elena explains her way of seeing Lila's attitude towards her. *Storia della bambina perduta*, 444: "C'entriamo sempre e soltanto noi due: lei che vuole che io dia ciò che la sua natura e le circostanze le hanno impedito di dare, io che non riesco a dare ciò che lei pretende; lei che si arrabbia per la mia insufficienza e per ripicca vuole ridurmi a niente come ha fatto con se stessa, io che ho scritto mesi e mesi e mesi per darle una forma che non si smargini, e batterla, e calmarla, e così a mia volta calmarmi." *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 466. "It's only and always the two of us who are involved: she who wants me to give what her nature and circumstances kept her from giving, I who can't give what she demands; she who gets angry at my inadequacy and out of spite wants to reduce me to nothing, as she has done with herself, I who have written for months and months and months to give her a form whose boundaries won't dissolve, and defeat her, and calm her, and so in turn calm myself."

¹⁸⁶ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 438. *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 459-460. "I was what Lila herself, sometimes joking, sometimes serious, had often repeated: Elena Greco, the brilliant friend of Raffaella Cerullo. From that unexpected reversal of destinies I would emerge annihilated."

¹⁸⁷ *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 459-460.

genius. In my opinion, Ferrante's employment of the etymologically fraught concepts of *geniale* and *genio* works in her text as semantic and practical realizations of the Classical *genius*. *Genius* in Latin has precisely the meaning of reciprocity of destinies that Lila and Elena assign to it: everyone in ancient Rome in fact possessed his own *genius*. In the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, the *genius*¹⁸⁸ is defined as:

literally 'that which is just born.' The *genius*, for a long time understood as the deification of the power of generation (...), was defined by Dumèzil (see bibliog. below) following the criticisms of W. Otto (...) as 'the entirety of traits united in a begotten being'. It is a deified concept, its seat in the forehead (Serv. On Aen. 3. 607), and is not far from the notion of the self. The *genius* forms the 'double' of the male, and is both born and dies with him (Hor. *Epist.* 2.2. 183 ff.). At an unknown date the same idea was developed for the 'double' of a woman (the *iuno*). This divine being, distinct from its human 'double', was the object of a cult.¹⁸⁹

The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* then analyzes the importance of the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* for Roman families, which was "honoured in each household, ... particularly on the occasion of marriage."¹⁹⁰ Surprisingly, not only men and women had their doubling *genius* or *iuno*, but also divinities and places of cult had their own *genius*.

The *genius* was not limited to individual humans. Divinities equally, at least ones with an official 'birth' or entry into the body of the communal cults, possessed a

¹⁸⁸ For all the attested instances of *genius* (and *Genius*) in Latin literature, from the Classical period to about 600 AD, see the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (TLL) online: https://www.degruyter.com/view/TLL/6-2-09/6_2_9_genius_v2007.xml?pi=0&moduleId=tll-entries&dbJumpTo=genius.

¹⁸⁹ Hornblower, Spawforth, 630.

¹⁹⁰ Hornblower, Spawforth, 630.

genius or a *iuno* (*genius*: first in 58 BC, ...). By extension every locality and establishment where the Romans exercised an activity had a *genius* which expressed the totality of its traits at the moment of constitution (e.g. *genius Romae*, ...).¹⁹¹

We have thus seen how, according to Roman religion, the *genius* (or *iuno*) can be referred to a person, a divinity, or a place. In my analysis on the relation between this Classical concept and Elena Ferrante's use of the etymological meaning of *genio*, I am going to employ all of these different senses of the word. The concept of the *genius* as the "double" of the self, deified in Roman religion seems to be operating, throughout the series, in the character of Elena's best (and genius) friend: Lila. In my opinion, however, Lila is not only Elena's *genius* (or *iuno*), but she is also symbolizing the *genius loci* of Naples.¹⁹²

I am now going to assess *genialis* in terms of its Latin etymology, which might be, again, brought back to life in the Italian by Ferrante in the first titular scene of the novel. As the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* points out, *genius* literarily means "that which is just born" and is thus strictly connected to the concept of generation. *Genialis* is the adjective derived from *genius* and the most attested instances of the word in Latin literature are also referencing its generative nature. The expressions *lectus* or *torus genialis*,¹⁹³ meaning "bridal bed", are in fact the most common ones for the word *genialis*. Importantly, the seminal dialogue where *geniale* is employed in the *Novels* is in fact taking place on Lila's bed, a few hours before her marriage takes place. The idea of generation could certainly be in the frame here, not just because of the setting of the scene on a bed, but also because Lila, as newlywed, will be on a *lectus genialis* very soon. Secondly, the bed is not just at the center of

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Infra.*

¹⁹³ For *genialis*, please see the TLL online: https://www.degruyter.com/view/TLL/6-2-09/6_2_9_genialis_v2007.xml?pi=0&moduleId=tll-entries&dbJumpTo=genialis.

the scene on a practical and conceptual sense, but also, through the narrator's voice, it becomes etymologically evoked in Elena's mental refrain on Lila's loss of virginity. The scene is very much Classical in taste: Elena is helping Lila in the preparation for the wedding, - both physically and psychologically -, helping her bathe, comb her hair and dress in the wedding gown.

Non l'avevo mai vista nuda, mi vergognai. Oggi posso dire che fu la vergogna di poggiare con piacere lo sguardo sul suo corpo, di essere la testimone coinvolta della sua bellezza di sedicenne poche ore prima che Stefano la toccasse, la penetrasse, la deformasse, forse, ingravidandola. Allora fu solo una tumultuosa sensazione di sconvenienza necessaria, una condizione in cui non si può girare lo sguardo dall'altra parte, non si può allontanare la mano senza riconoscere il proprio turbamento, senza dichiararlo proprio ritraendosi, senza quindi entrare in conflitto con l'imperturbata innocenza di chi ti sta turbando, senza esprimere proprio col rifiuto la violenta emozione che ti sconvolge, sicché ti obblighi a restare, a lasciarle lo sguardo sulle spalle di ragazzo, sui seni coi capezzoli intirizziti, sui fianchi stretti e le natiche tese, sul sesso nerissimo, sulle gambe lunghe, sulle ginocchia tenere, sulle caviglie ondulate, sui piedi eleganti; e fai come se nulla fosse, quando invece tutto è in atto, presente, lì nella stanza povera e un po' buia, intorno il mobilio miserabile, su un pavimento sconnesso chiazzato d'acqua, e ti agita il cuore, ti infiamma le vene.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ *L'amica geniale*, 309. *My Brilliant Friend*, 312-313. "I had never seen her naked, I was embarrassed. Today I can say that it was the embarrassment of gazing with pleasure at her body, of being the not impartial witness of her sixteen-year-old's beauty a few hours before Stefano touched her, penetrated her, disfigured her, perhaps, by making her pregnant. At the time it was just a tumultuous sensation of necessary awkwardness, a state in which you cannot avert the gaze or take away the hand without recognizing your own turmoil, without, by that retreat, declaring it, hence without coming into conflict with the undisturbed innocence of the one who is the cause of the turmoil, without expressing by that rejection the violent emotion that overwhelms you, so that it forces you to stay, to rest your gaze on the childish shoulders, on the breasts and stiffly cold nipples, on the narrow hips and the tense buttocks, on the black sex, on the long legs, on the tender knees, on the curved ankles, on the

All of these actions are, however, accompanied by Elena's mental rumination on her friend's imminent destiny, in a lyrical outburst which only Sappho would be capable of. In her article "Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città: *L'Amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante tra continuità e cambiamento", Laura Benedetti¹⁹⁵ has recognized the possible Sapphic undertone of the scene:

...l'imminenza del distacco ispira una sorta di commosso epitalamio nel cui confuso convergere di vergogna e desiderio risuonano echi del lamento geloso di Saffo... Non si tratta, però, di una rivelazione dei veri sentimenti di Elena, quanto piuttosto di una sua più piena comprensione, facilitata dallo iato temporale ("Oggi posso dire") della complessità di un'amicizia che ha segnato la sua vita.¹⁹⁶

Elena's thoughts on Lila's corporeity and on her sexuality are, in fact, on the verge of sapphic desire, although they could be also justly interpreted as Elena's overly-attached commentary on Lila's imminent defloration and coming of age. Be it as it may, Ferrante might have played with notions on Classical sexuality in this scene, defying contemporary prudery concerning sexuality and chose to employ, for this reason, a Sapphic, lyrical tone.¹⁹⁷

elegant feet; and to act as if it's nothing, when instead everything is there, present, in the poor dim room, amid the worn furniture, on the uneven, water-stained floor, and your heart is agitated, your veins inflamed."

¹⁹⁵ Benedetti, 184. In English (my translation): "... the imminence of detachment inspires a sort of touching epithalamium in whose confused convergence of shame and desire resounds the echoes of Sappho's jealous complaint. This is not, however, a revelation of the true sentiments of Elena, but rather her fuller understanding, facilitated by a temporal hiatus ("Today I can say") of the complexity of a friendship which has marked her life."

¹⁹⁶ Benedetti, 184.

¹⁹⁷ The situation is similar to the one described in Sappho's fragment 31 V, where the poet is assisting to her beloved's new male partner looking at her and is jealously recognizing a rival in him. This gives life to the lyrical swaying of the corporeal that happens in Sappho and, contextually, in Ferrante. Benedetti n 20, 184. "Mi sembra pari agli dei quell'uomo che siede di fronte a te e vicino ascolta te che dolcemente parli e ridi di un riso che suscita desiderio. Questa visione veramente mi ha turbato il cuore nel petto: appena ti guardo un breve istante, nulla mi è più possibile dire, ma la lingua mi si spezza e subito un fuoco sottile mi corre sotto la pelle [...] (Saffo, 137)." English translation, by Mariangela Labate: "He seems very similar to the gods/ That man who sits in front of you/ And listens to you speaking/ And smiles softly;/ And suddenly my heart throbs./ When

Another interesting feature of this scene is that Elena's only, momentary peace of mind can be achieved through the act of imagining her own boyfriend doing the same to her by deflowering her; imitation and mirroring are, again, a central feature of Elena's perception of her relationship with Lila. All of this, I argue, is reinforced by Lila's evocation of the concept of *geniale*.

In this scene, as elsewhere in the novel, Ferrante shrewdly foregrounds a narrative effect¹⁹⁸ that enhances the idea of reciprocity that we attach to Elena and Lila's friendship. Our viewpoint always coincides with Elena's perspective, but in this scene we hear for the first time Lila's opinion on Elena.¹⁹⁹ The narrative modes are those of non-omniscience and homodiegesis; but Ferrante also works the plot so that Lila's character constantly threatens to take over both the subject and the style of the novels.²⁰⁰

I glance at you,/ I can no longer speak,/ My tongue is broken and/ A subtle flame is creeping into my skin,/ My eyes can see nothing more,/ My ears are buzzing,/ Drops of sweat are oozing,/ My whole body is trembling./ I become greener than grass/ And I feel as if I were dead/ But everything must be tolerated, because ... a poor man..."

¹⁹⁸ In the documentary *Ferrante Fever* by Giacomo Durzi, writer Jonathan Franzen gives an interesting peek inside his interpretation of Ferrante's narrative craft: "Elena Ferrante has split herself in two... she is Lila and she is Lenù, this is something I try to do as a writer, I split myself up, I take these contradictory parts of myself and I put them in conflicts by setting up these two poles; the demonic pole of Lila and the cautious, sensible Lenù. The way they orbit around each other and constantly courting each other brutally, ..."

¹⁹⁹ As Franzen stated in the documentary *Ferrante Fever*: "One of my favorite moments in any novel in the longest time... It's the moment when I cried for the first time reading these books, it's the moment when you get what the title means. It's when Lila says: 'you have to keep studying, you're my brilliant friend.'" I choked up just reading that. Because we've been so inside Lenù, we don't realize that... it hits us like it hits her: wow! You think I'm the brilliant one! It's so moving..."

²⁰⁰ For the linguistic menace that Lila constitutes in her preferred choice of Neapolitan over Italian, see Antonelli. I think that Antonelli's idea could represent, linguistically, what is posited literarily in the *Novels*: that the authorial voice of Elena (Italian) is constantly threatened by Lila's voice (Neapolitan.) As Giulia Zagrebelski points out in *Ferrante Fever*: "C'è sempre una che ha più potere sull'altra..." My transl. "One (of the two) is always prevailing on the other one."

Genialis

The story begins, in fact, because of Lila's disappearance and of the narrator's desire to find her or, in some way, reconstruct what she was. In the narration itself, we see multiple metaliterary instances, for example, when Elena reads *The Blue Fairy* (the story Lila wrote as a child) or, later, when she reads Lila's diaries. In both scenes, Elena is afraid of losing her own authorial voice, because of the literary strength and influential power that her friend's voice possesses. Indeed, as Rebecca Falkoff has shown,²⁰¹ Ferrante drew heavily, when writing the *Neapolitan Novels*, on Christa Wolf's *The quest for Christa T.* In this novel, a very similar friendship is described, between the narrator (Christa) and her disappeared, genius friend Christa T.²⁰² An assessment of Ferrante's classical sources lends further complexity to the doubling and reciprocal mirroring of two women friends, who perform a mutual relation not only in life, but also in writing.²⁰³ My interpretation of Lila as the real *genius* and, in Italian, *genio* of the story, is a result, admittedly, of Ferrante's own stylistic virtuoso. While in the two titular scenes we hear Lila call Elena *geniale*, the overall impression that the novel conveys is that, ultimately, the real genius is Lila.²⁰⁴ On the level of content and form then, as Brogi shows,²⁰⁵ the two voices of the protagonists are both contained by one another and uniquely congenial to one another. *Genius* and *genio* are ultimately the same in the case of Lila. My interpretation of Lila as the *genius* of Elena is an

²⁰¹ <http://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>

²⁰² Falkoff's hypothesis that Raja could also be elaborating, in her novels, on her own friendship with the writer Christa Wolf is also a wonderful assessment on the mimetic role of literature in life.

²⁰³ The interpretation of Lila as a figure for both the author (especially for her *smarginatura*) and for her muse will be discussed *Infra* in my thesis. In *Ferrante Fever* Nicola Lagioia points out that "L'amica geniale è la musa della scrittrice." My transl. "The brilliant friend is the muse of the writer."

²⁰⁴ Or, as Giulia Zagrebelsky says in *Ferrante Fever*: "L'amica geniale per Lila è Lenù e l'amica geniale per Lenù è Lila." "The brilliant friend to Lila is Lenù and the brilliant friend to Lenù is Lila."

²⁰⁵ <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=13515>

unraveling, in Classical terms, of the modern meanings of reciprocity and congeniality that the two friends share as base for their relationship.

From the incipient stages of their lives, Elena and Lila are seen mirroring each other in actions. Moreover, as has been noted, this is not only true on the agential level, but on the onomastic one too.²⁰⁶ Their nicknames are almost the same: Lenù (Elena) and Lina (as everyone calls her, from the original Raffaella) or Lila (Elena's unique way of naming her.) This could be indirect proof for my hypothesis that Lila constitutes a sort of "double" of Elena. Another interesting parallel to the Roman *genii*, is that, just like them, Elena and Lila were born at roughly the same time, in August 1944.²⁰⁷ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* defines the *genius* as the double of the man, which, importantly, is "both born and dies with him..."²⁰⁸ Again, this detail on the two friends' identical (or, at least, similar) birthdays shows that the concept of *genius* and that of *genialis* could be the lynchpin to the interpretation of the books.

Going back to the *geniale* of the title, one can get a confirmation that it possesses the Classical effect of reciprocity on the protagonists from Ferrante herself. In *Frantumaglia* the author states, in fact:

[Ma] nella relazione tra Elena e Lila accade che Elena, la subalterna, ricavi proprio dalla sua subalternità una sorta di brillantezza che disorienta, che abbaglia Lila. E' un movimento difficile da raccontare, ma mi ha interessata per questo. Diciamo

²⁰⁶ Russo Bullaro, Grace. "Book presentation: THE WORKS OF ELENA FERRANTE: Reconfiguring the margins- Separating Fad from Substance." Conversation with Rebecca Falkoff, Franco Baldasso. Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, April 13, 2017, New York University, New York.

²⁰⁷ Ferrante has probably picked this date intentionally. In August 1944 Italy was still undergoing the bloody Civil War and the Allied forces at that point had just reached the Gothic Line. Moreover, March 1944 is the date Vesuvius erupted in Naples and this detail could link the date the two protagonists were born (roughly) with their later experience of Vesuvius erupting in 1979. For an historically accurate account of the war-torn city and of the eruption, see *Naples '44: a World War II diary of occupied Italy* by Norman Lewis and its review, here: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/28/naples-44-norman-lewis-rereading>.

²⁰⁸ Hornblower, Spawforth, 630. *Supra*.

così: i moltissimi fatti della vita di Lila ed Elena mostreranno come l'una tragga forza dall'altra. Ma attenzione, non solo nel senso di aiutarsi, ma anche nel senso di saccheggiarsi, rubarsi sentimento e intelligenza, levarsi reciprocamente energia.²⁰⁹

While one would think that Lila is the dominating figure in their friendship, it seems like Elena can always resurface and even disorient her friend, drawing some of her genius from her. This, however, is reciprocally true, for Ferrante.

In her analysis of the words “genio” and “geniale” in Neapolitan, Daniela Brogi points out something similar. Her interpretation is based on the semantic sphere of the Classical *genius* of the two friends. Brogi in fact references a Neapolitan expression and an Italian one, both featuring the word “genio”:

In più, l'espressione “geniale” a Napoli ha una pienezza semantica tutta sua: rimanda subito anche al modo di dire “non tenere genio”, per intendere: non avere la voglia, l'istinto profondo. L'amica geniale, dentro questo sistema semantico, diventa anche l'amica più affine, più prossima a quello da cui siamo stati generati (genio deriva dal latino “gignere”: creare). Le due amiche sono attaccate l'una all'altra da un destino di reciprocità, anche in senso tecnico (la storia di Lina sta dentro il racconto di Elena); sono il riferimento più a genio l'una dell'altra anche nel senso dell'attitudine morbosa a superare i rispettivi sensi di inadeguatezza, a

²⁰⁹ *La Frantumaglia*, 225. *Frantumaglia*, 233. “But in the relationship between Elena and Lila, Elena, the subordinate, gets from her subordination a sort of brilliance that disorients, that dazzles Lila. It's a movement that's hard to describe, but for that reason it interested me. Let me put it like this: the many events in the lives of Lila and Elena will show how one draws strength from the other. But beware: not only in the sense that they help each other but also in the sense that they ransack each other, stealing feeling and intelligence, depriving each other of energy.”

trovare un varco dentro un mondo maschile che le vuole subalterne, compiendo la mossa più paradossale ma più comune, cioè stabilendo una competizione, una rivalità con chi è più simile: l'altra, l'amica, l'amica geniale, per l'appunto.²¹⁰

This rich definition of “genio” has several important implications. Brogi traces the notion back to its Classical etymology and underscores, in this context, the importance of the original meaning of the word. Interestingly, too, she has us consider the evolution of the word, which became absorbed, over time, into colloquial expressions, both in Neapolitan and in Italian.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to survey the textual passages in the novels where the Italian word *genio* is employed. An example of the linguistic use of the Neapolitan expression is contained in the praise that the Mafioso Michele Solara sings of Lila in the third book of the volume. Importantly, we here have two occurrences of the word *genio*, out of the three that are in this book and the four that are in the whole series. In this scene, Michele Solara (the Mafioso who is in love with Lila) has just looked at Elena and noted that she is very smart and that the neighbors are proud of her, because she became a famous writer. Lila, however, is something else. She has some kind of force that no one comprehends. Michele recognizes this creative genius and knows that Elena benefited from it too; by creating a career nurtured by Lila's support.

²¹⁰ Brogi, Daniela. “Sé come un'altra. Su *L'amica geniale*, di Elena Ferrante.”, my translation: “Furthermore, in Naples, the expression “genius” has its own semantic meaning. It traces back to the saying “non tenere genio,” meaning not wanting to do something, and not having a profound inclination for it. Within this semantic system, the genius friend also becomes the friend most like us, the closest to that from which we are generated (in fact, “genius” comes from the Latin term “gignere,” to create). The two friends are attached to one another by a fate of reciprocity, also in a technical sense (Lina's story lies within Elena's tale); each is the most congenial (in Italian, “a genio”) reference to the other, also in the sense of their obsessive attitude to overcome their respective senses of inadequacy, to find their place in a man's world, which would like them to be subordinate, carrying out the most paradoxical, and yet the most common move, namely establishing a competition, a rivalry with who is the most similar: the other, the friend, the genius friend, indeed.” <http://www.leparoleeleucose.it/?p=13515>. In *Ferrante Fever*, Nicola Lagioia also points out that “Amore e competizione vanno di pari passo fra Elena e Lila e però al tempo stesso le due sembrano legate quasi psichicamente, telepaticamente le une alle altre...” My transl. “Love and competition go hand in hand for Elena and Lila, yet, at the same time, the two seem to have a quasi-psychic or a telepathic tie to one another...”

Lina ha una cosa viva nella testa che non ha nessuno, una cosa forte, che salta di qua e di là e niente riesce a fermarla, una cosa che nemmeno i medici sanno vedere e che secondo me non conosce nemmeno lei anche se ce l'ha dalla nascita – non la conosce e non la vuole riconoscere, guardate che faccia cattiva sta facendo in questo momento –, una cosa che se lei non sta di genio può causare molti problemi a chiunque, ma se sta di genio lascia tutti a bocca aperta.²¹¹

Ferrante here manages to link dialect to its Classical roots, instantiating in her text what Brogi has then noted in her linguistic analysis.

Finally, Elena employs the word, in the last book of the series, to describe Lila's creative genius as a child, when she wrote *The Blue Fairy*:

Se il genio che Lila aveva espresso da bambina con la Fata blu, turbando la maestra Oliviero, adesso, in vecchiaia, sta manifestando tutta la sua potenza? In quel caso il suo libro sarebbe diventato – anche solo per me – la prova del mio fallimento e leggendolo avrei capito come avrei dovuto scrivere ma non ero stata capace.²¹²

In sum, the word “genio” and “geniale” are only employed by or used to refer to Lila, filtered by Elena's opinion that her fate was exchanged with that of Lila, the actual “genius friend”.

²¹¹ *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*, 304. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay: Neapolitan Novels, Book Three*, 334. “Lina has something alive in her mind that no one else has, something strong, that jumps here and there and nothing can stop it, a thing that not even the doctors can see and that I think not even she knows, even though it's been there since she was born—she doesn't know it and doesn't want to recognize it, look what a mean face she's making right now— a thing that, if it doesn't like you can cause you a lot of problems but, if it does, leaves everyone astonished.”

²¹² *Storia della bambina perduta*, 437. *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 459. “If the genius that Lila had expressed as a child in *The Blue Fairy*, disturbing Maestra Oliviero, is now, in old age, manifesting all its power? In that case her book would become—even only for me—the proof of my failure, and reading it I would understand how I should have written but had been unable to.”

The connection and reciprocity in fates that the girls share is based, for Elena, on Lila's creative genius. This is yet another layer of meaning of the word which is connected, once again, to Lila; through her artistic and literary creations, she in fact inspires, goads and influences Elena, creating a connection founded on the shared experiences of learning and creating new things. This connection, we will discover, is for life, just like the Roman *genius* was. Lila's agency is reflected throughout the course of the whole series, not only in Elena's actions or tastes, but also in her literary endeavors. Elena in fact finds that she and Lila are "connected". They are, in the text "one in two, two in one":

Ma soprattutto sentivo la necessità di farla sedere accanto a me, dirle: vedi come siamo state affiatate, una in due, due in una, e provarle con il rigore che mi pareva di aver appreso in Normale, con l'accanimento filologico che avevo imparato da Pietro, come il suo libro di bambina avesse messo radici profonde nella mia testa fino a sviluppare nel corso degli anni un altro libro, differente, adulto, mio, e tuttavia imprescindibile dal suo, dalle fantasie che avevamo elaborato insieme nel cortile dei nostri giochi, lei e io in continuità, formate, sformate, riformate.²¹³

Ferrante's use of the concept of a philological analysis of her own text, in order to retrace Lila's one is very interesting. First, this could arguably be an historical reference to the concept of allusion, developed in the fifties by Classical Philology professor Giorgio Pasquali²¹⁴ at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa. The "rigor" and "philological

²¹³ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 454. *The Story of a New Name: Neapolitan Novels, Book Two*, 455. "But most of all I felt the need to have her sit beside me, to tell her, you see how connected we are, *one in two, two in one*, and prove to her with the rigor that it seemed to me I had learned in the Normale, with the philological persistence I had learned from Pietro, how her child's book had put down deep roots in my mind and had, in the course of the years, produced another book, different, adult, mine, and yet inseparable from hers, from the fantasies that we had elaborated together in the courtyard of our games, she and I continuously formed, deformed, reformed."

²¹⁴ Pasquali, 1951.

persistence” which lead Elena to her formulation of literary allusion could, in fact, come from this perspective.

Secondly, this could be yet another example that Falkoff’s theory²¹⁵ of Wolf’s influence on Ferrante is well-rounded and confirmed at the textual level. While actually referencing what has happened in reality between Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels* and Christa Wolf’s *The Quest for Christa T.*, Elena Greco is arguably describing in the novel what happened between her text and Raffaella Cerullo’s *The Blue Fairy*. Christa Wolf’s novel would be, for Falkoff, an important source for the *Neapolitan Novels*. In her article, she shows that Ferrante’s relationship to Christa Wolf, as a translator, has probably inspired the literary friendship of Elena and Lila. In other words, Elena Greco is here arguably voicing Elena Ferrante’s thoughts on the influence that the work of translating Christa Wolf’s work might have had on her own tetralogy.

The Goethian “genius”

The epigraph to the novels arguably demonstrates how the concept “genius” functions within the Christian paradigm. I think that Ferrante, in her epigraph to the *Novels*, linked the assonance of the *geniale* of her title with the goethian concept of “genius”.

IL SIGNORE: Ma sì, fatti vedere quando vuoi; non ho mai odiato i tuoi simili, di tutti gli spiriti che dicono di no, il Beffardo è quello che mi dà meno fastidio.

L’agire dell’uomo si sgonfia fin troppo facilmente, egli presto si invaghisce del

²¹⁵ *Supra*.

riposo assoluto. Perciò gli do volentieri un compagno che lo pungoli e che sia tenuto a fare la parte del diavolo. J.W. GOETHE, *Faust*²¹⁶

Ferrante's epigraph contains an explicit reference to the figure of Mephistopheles, the devil or, better, the "genius" as creative spirit. The author draws this excerpt from *Faust*'s "Prologue in Heaven",²¹⁷ where God sends Mephistopheles, the "creative spirit," or, classically speaking, the *genius*, to earth, in order to goad Faust's lazy spirit. I believe that an identification of this devilish and creative spirit with the "genius friend" Lila is given here, and is further corroborated, in the books, by the neighbors' gossip over the girl's nature. The vision of Lila as a sort of diabolic spirit, is conveyed through Catholic folklore in the series.²¹⁸

First of all, in the first book of the series, when she falls ill, Lila is called a "spirito, lo spirito di una bambina..."²¹⁹ Secondly, when Elena tries to wrap her head around the concept of the "Spirito Santo", in a controversial attempt at understanding Catholic dogma, Lila points out: "E tu che fai? Un corso teologico in cui ti sforzi di capire che cos'è lo Spirito Santo? Lascia stare, è stato il Diavolo a inventarsi il mondo, non il Padre, il Figlio e lo Spirito Santo."²²⁰ The author generally infuses Lila with a blasphemous aura and at one point in the

²¹⁶ *L'Amica geniale*, Epigrafe. *My Brilliant Friend, Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, Epigraph. "THE LORD: Therein thou'rt free, according to thy merits; The like of thee have never moved My hate. Of all the bold, denying Spirits, The waggish knave least trouble doth create. Man's active nature, flagging, seeks too soon the level; Unqualified repose he learns to crave; Whence, willingly, the comrade him I gave, Who works, excites, and must create, as Devil. J.W. Goethe, *Faust*, Translation by Bayard Taylor"

²¹⁷ *Faust*.

²¹⁸ There are multiple instances for this popular credence on Lila; one particularly compelling expression of it is in the episode at page 139 et seq. of *Storia del nuovo cognome. The Story of a New Name*, 140 et seq. Forse citare?

²¹⁹ *L'Amica geniale*, 87. *My Brilliant Friend*, 91. "a spirit, the spirit of a child..." After her first *smarginatura* (*dissolving boundaries*) episode on New Years' Eve of 1958 and after her father throws her out the window, Lila goes through a difficult period. This is probably also caused by her parents' decision to not send her to middle school, and having her attend, instead, some other technical school she does not like. In this context Lila falls ill for some time and the neighbors even say she could die.

²²⁰ *L'Amica geniale*, 257. *My Brilliant Friend*, 261. "And what are you doing? A theology course in which you struggle to understand what the Holy Spirit is? Forget it, it was the Devil who invented the world, not the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

second novel of the series, we are even privy to her devilish nature. At this point Lila is the “signora Carracci”,²²¹ and as advertisement for Cerullo shoes she manages to hang on the wall of the Solaras’ new shoe-shop an enlarged picture of herself in her wedding gown. Lila, however, does not want to be recognizable in the image²²² and so she and Elena make a sort of modern art piece out of it, gluing pieces of colored paper on the picture and painting directly on Lila’s figure. At one point, during a heated quarrel over the shop’s management, while Michele, Gigliola, Pinuccia and Rino are all shouting at each other, the picture suddenly and unexplainably takes fire.²²³ Having no rational explanation at hand, Gigliola, jealous of her boyfriend Michele’s attention for Lila, later says that it was Lila who did this, because she is like the devil who, disguised as a woman in images, if discovered, takes sudden fire.

Ma la ragazza... con piglio molto combattivo diede la colpa a Lila stessa, cioè alla sua immagine storpiata che aveva preso fuoco da sola, come succedeva al diavolo quando per traviare i santi assumeva le sembianze di femmina ma i santi invocavano Gesù e il demonio si mutava in fiamma. Aggiunse, per avvalorare la sua versione, che Pinuccia stessa le aveva raccontato di come la cognata avesse la

²²¹ As Stefano Carracci himself sadly reminds her during their tragic honeymoon, Lila is Signora Carracci now. *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 34. “Tu non ti chiami più Cerullo. Tu sei la signora Carracci e devi fare quello che ti dico io.” *The Story of a New Name*, 34. “Your name is no longer Cerullo. You are Signora Carracci and you must do as I say.”

²²² This, Elena argues, could be because of Lila’s will to vanish as a person.

²²³ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 139-140. “All’improvviso, non si sa come, il pannello – il pannello con le strisce di cartoncino nero, la foto, le chiazze dense di colore – emise un suono rauco, una specie di respiro malato, e s’incendiò con una sfiammata alta. Pinuccia era di spalle alla foto, quando successe. La vampa le si levò dietro come da un focolare segreto e le lambì i capelli, che crepitarono e le sarebbero bruciati tutti in testa se Rino prontamente non glieli avesse spenti a mani nude.” *The Story of a New Name*, 140. “Suddenly, and it’s unclear how, the panel—the panel with the strips of black paper, the photograph, the thick patches of color—let out a rasping sound, a kind of sick breath, and burst into flame. Pinuccia had her back to the photograph when it happened. The fire blazed up behind her as if from a secret hearth and licked her hair, which crackled and would have burned completely if Rino hadn’t quickly extinguished it with his bare hands.”

capacità di non restare incinta e, anzi, se proprio non ci riusciva si lasciava colare via il bambino rifiutando i doni del Signore.²²⁴

For Gigliola and the other neighborhood's women, Lila's body has some internal resistance to generation. Everyone thinks that Lila in fact knows how to shun generative powers and has not conceived offspring with Stefano because of her devilish nature. While there are, of course, other rational explanations for the accident, (i.e, that Gigliola had a lighter in her hands and probably set fire to the image), the accusation of diabolic nature seems a clichè when it comes to Lila. Everytime someone is jealous or has something to reproach her, they feel entitled to accuse her because of the incapability to get pregnant from Stefano. The same Elena, angry at Lila for her behavior at her professor's place during a party, thinks to herself: "Diedi ragione a Gigliola e a Pinuccia, nella foto c'era lei stessa che sfiammava come il diavolo."²²⁵

Once again, when vacationing on the island of Ischia, Elena explains to her devote host Nella that since she was a little girl Lila seemed like a devil, and she really was one, but in a good way. This scene is part of the terrible episode, for Elena, of Nino and Lila falling in love on Ischia. Elena had to leave the two young lovers to their destiny and go stay at Nella's in Barano, with the family of Nino Sarratore. This is one of the most problematic moments between Elena and Lila, when Elena's feelings for Nino almost make her hate her best friend. In this extremely critical time for their friendship, Nella gives her opinion on Lila and, contextually, on their friendship. The woman, being Maestra Oliviero's cousin, brings back

²²⁴ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 140. *The Story of a New Name*, 140. "But the girl... with a fiercely combative look blamed Lila herself, that is, she blamed the disfigured image, which had caught fire spontaneously, like the Devil, who, attempting to corrupt the saints, assumed the features of a woman, but the saints called on Jesus, and the demon was transformed into flames. She added, in confirmation of her version, that Pinuccia herself had told her that her sister-in-law had the ability not to stay pregnant, and, in fact, if she was unsuccessful she would let the child drain out, rejecting the gifts of the Lord."

²²⁵ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 162-63. *The Story of a New Name*, 163. "I felt that Gigliola and Pinuccia were right: it was she herself who in the photograph had blazed up like the devil."

to surface the riveting competition that Elena feels towards Lila, stirring up her ancient feelings of jealousy because of Maestra's preference for Lila. However Nella likes Elena better and says that the Sarratores agree with her. Even then, we will see, Elena cannot say ill of her genius friend.

«Ti ha lodato moltissimo» disse Nella parlando della Oliviero, «ma quando ha saputo che eri venuta a trovarmi insieme a due tue amiche sposate mi ha fatto molte domande, specialmente sulla signora Lina». «Che ha detto?». «Ha detto che in tutta la sua carriera di maestra non ha mai avuto un'alunna così brava».

L'evocazione del vecchio primato di Lila mi disturbò. «È vero» ammisi. Ma Nella fece una smorfia di assoluto disaccordo, le si accesero gli occhi. «Mia cugina è una maestra eccezionale» disse, «eppure secondo me questa volta si è sbagliata». «No, non si è sbagliata». «Posso dirti quello che penso?». «Certo». «Non è che ti dispiaci?». «No». «La signora Lina non mi è piaciuta. Tu sei assai meglio, sei più bella e più intelligente. Ne ho parlato pure con i Sarratore e loro sono d'accordo con me». «Dite così perché mi volete bene». «No. Statti attenta, Lenù. Lo so che siete molto amiche, mia cugina me l'ha detto. E io non voglio mettere bocca nelle cose che non mi riguardano. Ma a me basta un'occhiata per giudicare le persone. La signora Lina lo sa che sei meglio di lei e perciò non ti vuole bene come le vuoi bene tu». Sorrisi fintamente scettica: «Mi vuole male?». «Non lo so. Ma lei il male lo sa fare, ce l'ha scritto in faccia, basta guardarle la fronte e gli occhi». Scossi la testa, repressi il compiacimento. Ah, se fosse stato tutto così lineare. Ma sapevo già – anche se non come lo so oggi – che tra noi due tutto era più aggrovigliato. E scherzai, risi, feci ridere Nella. Le dissi che Lila la prima volta non faceva mai una buona impressione. Fin da piccola pareva un diavolo, e lo era davvero, ma nel

senso buono. Aveva una testa pronta e riusciva bene in qualsiasi cosa le capitasse di applicarsi: se avesse potuto studiare sarebbe diventata una scienziata come Madame Curie o una grandissima romanziera come Grazia Deledda, o persino una come Nilde Iotti, la signora di Togliatti.²²⁶

Elena's definition of Lila as 'a good devil' brings us back to the epigraph and to *Faust*. When Nella points out that she believes Lila can do evil, Elena says that Lila seemed a devil since she was a kid, but that she was so in a good way. Let us now consider the figure of *Faust's* Mephistopheles for Faust; this devil is actually not just a negative character for the protagonist. In fact, he is also a good one; he goads Faust and spurs him to interrogate himself on the world in a more profound way. Elena's words go back to that unexplainable and undefinable force that Lila possesses in her quick(silver) mind and that Michele has noticed, too. Ferrante is here playing with the concepts of a good devil and a bad devil, linking the Goethian creation of Mephistopheles to Italian Catholic culture and language.²²⁷

We will remember that Elena, however, has also called Lila a "spirito, lo spirito di una

²²⁶ Storia del nuovo cognome, 285-86. The Story of a New Name, 285-86. "She praised you a lot," Nella said, speaking of Maestra Oliviero, "but when she found out that you came to see me with your two married friends she asked a lot of questions, especially about Signora Lina." "What did she say?" "She said that in her entire career as a teacher she never had such a good student." The evocation of Lila's old primacy disturbed me. "It's true," I admitted. But Nella made a grimace of absolute disagreement, her eyes lit up. "My cousin is an exceptional teacher," she said, "and yet in my view this time she is wrong." "No, she's not wrong." "Can I tell you what I think?" "Of course." "It won't upset you?" "No." "I didn't like Signora Lina. You are much better, you're prettier and more intelligent. I talked about it with the Sarratores, too, and they agree with me." "You say that because you love me." "No. Pay attention, Lenù. I know that you are good friends, my cousin told me. And I don't want to interfere in things that have nothing to do with me. But a glance is enough for me to judge people. Signora Lina knows that you're better than her and so she doesn't love you the way you love her." I smiled, pretending skepticism. "Does she hate me?" "I don't know. But she knows how to wound, it's written in her face, it's enough to look at her forehead and her eyes." I shook my head, I repressed my satisfaction. Ah, if it were all so straightforward. But I already knew—although not the way I do today—that between the two of us everything was more tangled. And I joked, laughed, made Nella laugh. I told her that Lila never made a good impression the first time. Since she was little she had seemed like a devil, and she really was, but in a good way. She had a quick mind and did well in whatever she happened to apply herself to: if she could have studied she would have become a scientist like Madame Curie or a great novelist like Grazia Deledda, or even like Nilde Iotti, the lover of Togliatti."

²²⁷ "Buon diavolo" is in fact an Italian expression meaning: "good man, a good person. Referred to someone who, despite his faults, can be forgiven, or to some limited and humble, but good person. It can also be said of someone flaunting crabbiness, but actually hiding a good personality." (my transl. From http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario-modi-di-dire/D/diavolo.shtml?refresh_ce-cp#6.) Ferrante is playing with this notion ironically, because everyone knows that Lila is very far from being a "buon diavolo" in this sense.

bambina”²²⁸ and not an actual girl. The Christian concept of “uno spirito”, which Ferrante derives from Goethe’s *Faust*, is importantly indebted to the same Classical concept I have referenced and has to do with the spurring, creative force of a *genius* that Lila represents.²²⁹

Finally, Ferrante’s reference to *Faust*’s Mephistopheles in the epigraph also traces back to Goethe’s assimilation of the snake (Mephistopheles’s “uncle”) with the *genius loci* of a place, and thus confirms the strong Classical roots of the Italian series.²³⁰ This Roman myth’s presence in *The Neapolitan Novels* and its link to Lila, the “genius friend,” led me to consider her firstly, as Elena’s *genius* and secondly, as the spirit for an unspecified, yet possible, place.

Genius loci: smarginatura and heroization

Ferrante’s consistent intertextual references to the *Aeneid*, and more generally to Classical conceptions of spaces, has led me to investigate the theme of the *genius* and, consequently, of the *genius loci*. In the first volume of the *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena shows her interest in the *Aeneid*, particularly specifying her interest, in a high school paper, in the figure of Dido, which she also reminisces about in her narration. This is a shared interest with

²²⁸ *L’Amica geniale*, 87. My Brilliant Friend, 91. “a spirit, the spirit of a child...”

²²⁹ It will be noted, tangentially, that the Christian paradigm is curiously absent from the series, even though speaking of a fifties Naples would seem to necessitate referencing Catholic concepts on, e.g., life, family and the sacraments. Arguably, what is more present in the series is a popular and almost anthropological conception of religion. As we have seen in the scene where Lila’s picture takes fire, the author likes to give a folkloric taste to Catholic and Christian conceptions. In fact, I believe that, although indirectly, the Classical subtext operates with greater force in the context of the novels and conveys the concepts of both *genius* and *genius loci*, as connected to Lila.

²³⁰ In my work, I am not focusing on Goethe’s treatment of Classical myth, but rather on Ferrante’s treatment of it, which involves both the *genius*, and the *genius loci*.

Lila who is also very drawn to the figure of Dido²³¹ in her independent study of the text. This detail in the novel, along with the intratextual mentioning of the Virgilian character in *Frantumaglia*,²³² is proof of Ferrante's interest in and, arguably, remodeling of Classical viewpoints. The author speaks of Dido²³³ as the only woman, in ancient times, who founded a city. In the passage, Ferrante shows how Naples became a meaningful place for her, when she started to finally feel desirous for someone and when she understood that one has to learn how to "perdersi in città",²³⁴ in order not to get lost in it. The paradoxical passage ends with an important reference to the foundational myth of Carthage.²³⁵ As shown in my first chapter,²³⁶ the author also calls Naples a city of "desire", with possible references to Serao's²³⁷ definition and to Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.²³⁸ "The Cities" shows an autobiographical attachment to the epic of Virgil in relation to his concepts of space, as they are redefined, in the text, by the presence of a woman.

The city of Naples is a *locus* that has been extensively explored in literature, from ancient to contemporary times. In Classical times, Naples is linked to Virgil and to his *Aeneid*; Aeneas' to the Underworld begins in fact at Cuma, in the bay of Naples, starting with his encounter with the *Sibylla Cumana* (*Aen.* VI, 10). Moreover, along with the poet's epitaph²³⁹ from a *colombarium* in Mergellina, possible confirmation that he was really buried in the city, Virgil's preference for Naples over Rome is an ascertained fact in his biography.

²³¹ Gallippi in Russo Bullaro, Love, 102: "It should be noted that Virgil's Dido is a very important figure for Elena Ferrante, who places her at the very center of Lila's point of view."

²³² *La Frantumaglia*, 139-144. *Frantumaglia*, 147-153. Interestingly, Gallippi uncovered, in his article, the relevance of Dido for Ferrante but did not consider this passage, which links the Classical conception of space in the Virgilian epic to Ferrante's own autobiographical experience. *Supra*.

²³³ The idea of Dido as an agential character who actively not only founds a city, but who, herself writes comes from Ovid's *Heroides VII*. The general idea, in Ferrante, that women are characters who write, not only is a certain autobiographical reference but probably owes to the Ovidian tradition.

²³⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 134. "Learning to get lost in a city." *Frantumaglia*, 143.

²³⁵ *La Frantumaglia*, 139. *Frantumaglia*, 148.

²³⁶ *Supra*.

²³⁷ Serao, 42.

²³⁸ *Invisible Cities*, 45-46. In "Cities and Desire", Calvino depicts in fact a city (*Zobeide*) which is made by man as a trap for their desire: a dreamed-of woman who, escaping, ends up to reverse the paradigm and entrap men in their "ugly" urbanistic creation.

²³⁹ "Mantua me genuit, Calabri/ rapuere, tenet nunc/ Parthenope; cecini pascua rura duces."

While my present research does not allow me to go any further on the theme, I can here just briefly mention that in the middle ages Virgil came to be the city's *genius loci*,²⁴⁰ and many myths gathered around his figure as wizard/poet and, importantly, as magic protector of the city.²⁴¹ Ferrante's knowledge on the city of Naples is certainly informed by this Virgilian implication and, for this reason, her reference to the *Aeneid* is all the more relevant in the context of the *Neapolitan Novels*.

I would argue, then, that the reference to the *Aeneid* in the *Neapolitan Novels* is not casual, but brings up the aforementioned reference from *Frantumaglia*, reminding us how Virgil's use of the city, for Ferrante, mirrors and projects the desires of Dido, as it does in Elena's and Lila's descriptions of Naples.²⁴² And while Gallippi sees Lila as a catalyst for both writing and for the founding of a new city, and posits²⁴³ her possible identification with Parthenope, I would argue that she could be seen, in her nature of *genius*, as the *genius loci* of Naples.

Both the protagonists of the series have an ambiguous bond with the neighborhood and, in adulthood, with Naples. While Elena resolves her problematic relationship with the city by leaving it, Lila's attachment to (and repulsion for) Naples is overwhelming and remains an unresolved issue. Lila, the "genius friend", symbolizes the Classical *genius* in all of its complexity. The Classical meanings of *genius* and *genius loci* were not as different as we may conceive of them today.²⁴⁴ As previously noted, the *genius* can be associated not only to a person, but also to a place: "...every locality and establishment where the Romans

²⁴⁰ On the issue, see Comparetti.

²⁴¹ On this, see Serao.

²⁴² *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay: Neapolitan Novels, Book Three*, 25-26. *Supra*.

²⁴³ *Ibid*.

²⁴⁴ *Supra*.

exercised an activity had a *genius* which expressed the totality of its traits at the moment of constitution (e.g., *genius Romae...*)”²⁴⁵

George K. Boyce’s article “Significance of the Serpents on Pompeian House Shrines”²⁴⁶ sheds new light on the definition of *genius*. The author poses the problem of understanding the word *genius* as both the double of a deified living (or dead) person and as of that of a certain place.²⁴⁷

When found alone, in fact, the word possesses an ineffable meaning. Instead, if the word is followed by a genitive, the concept we ought to grasp finally takes shape. *Genius loci*, *genius Augusti*, *genius Romae*, *genius huius montis*, are all understandable in their meaning of “protective spirits of a particular place, or person.” It is also interesting, in this context, to ponder the grammatical meaning of *genius* in these expressions, which represents a protective spirit as both objective and subjective genitive. If we take the case of *genius Augusti*, for instance, as objective genitive, the protection is bestowed from the spirit to the person it is referred to; as subjective genitive, it is the opposite: the person bestows this protection to the citizens of Rome, for example, in the case of the *genius Augusti*, through means of the spirit. In the Oxford Classical Dictionary, this double significance of the *genius Augusti* is explained in its aetiology:

The cult of the *genius* of the *paterfamilias*, a pillar of domestic and client relationships, was used by Augustus to link Roman citizens closely to his person: associated with the *Lares Augusti* in crossroads-shrines, invoked with the *genius* of

²⁴⁵ Hornblower, Spawforth, 630.

²⁴⁶ Boyce, 13-22.

²⁴⁷ Boyce’s analysis involves Aen. V, where Aeneas is libating at the grave of his father and a serpent suddenly pops up. To Boyce, this would be proof for the fact that the serpent is to be interpreted as solely *genius loci*, and not, as many think today, of both Anchises’ *daimon* and of the spirit symbolizing the cult taking place at his grave.

the *paterfamilias* at private banquets, the *genius Augusti*, double of the living emperor, rapidly became an important element in Roman ruler-cult. It was generally represented (like the *iuno* of the empress) by a togate male with the features of the ruler, carrying a cornucopia and often a patera.”²⁴⁸

This concept takes special significance in relation to place. Lila’s static disposition accompanies her throughout her life: she in fact never leaves Naples or the Bay, except for her brief stay at Gualdo a Tadino, still in the Province of Naples. As Lila mentions more than once in the series, the neighborhood (“il rione”, in Italian), is, in fact, her natural element; outside of it she feels unsafe. This immediately marks her as different from Elena, who seeks out a new life for herself, in a different place than Naples; intense study and new geographical discoveries seem in fact all one in her resolutions for the future. In an extended passage²⁴⁹ from the first novel, Lila and Elena, as children, attempt to reach the sea on foot, in a little journey that reveals their inclinations. While Lila is in fact the motivator of the trip, and Elena is more of a follower, the adventure will finally reverse their initial roles.

Si era verificata una misteriosa inversione di atteggiamenti: io, malgrado la pioggia, avrei continuato il cammino, mi sentivo lontana da tutto e da tutti, e la lontananza – avevo scoperto per la prima volta – mi estingueva dentro ogni legame e ogni preoccupazione; Lila s’era bruscamente pentita del suo stesso piano, aveva

²⁴⁸ Hornblower, Spawforth, 630.

²⁴⁹ This passage is also linked to the one I have analyzed from *La Frantumaglia*, where spatial understanding and personal desires are intertwined. *Supra*.

rinunciato al mare, era voluta tornare dentro i confini del rione. Non mi ci
raccapezzavo.²⁵⁰

Later, Elena wonders about Lila: “Voleva uscire dal rione restando nel rione?”²⁵¹ This paradoxical question sums up well the ambiguous disposition of Lila towards the unknown. In the end, however willing she may be to seek out new adventures and discoveries, she will confine herself to the neighborhood and to Naples only, living a vicarious life through Elena, in this case in the form of geographical explorations and professional success. This interesting process of inversion both epitomizes Lila’s role as Elena’s *genius*, and hints to her possible identification with the *genius loci* of the city, which is highlighted by her decision to never leave Naples.

Smarginatura

The importance of the city of Naples for Lila and, simultaneously, her will to disappear and vanish into thin air, can be seen in multiple passages. In the concept by Ferrante, Lila’s own body’s blending with the outside world is referred to as “smarginatura”

²⁵⁰ *L’Amica geniale*, 74. *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, 78-79. “A mysterious inversion of attitudes had occurred: I, despite the rain, would have continued on the road, I felt far from everything and everyone, and distance—I discovered for the first time—extinguished in me every tie and every worry; Lila had abruptly repented of her own plan, she had given up the sea, she had wanted to return to the confines of the neighborhood. I couldn’t figure it out.”

²⁵¹ *L’Amica geniale*, 269. “Did she want to leave the neighborhood by staying in the neighborhood?” *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, 273.

and it closely resembles a panic attack. “Smarginare”²⁵² in Italian is used for the binding of books and it literally means “to trim the margins of”, or, contrarily, in typography it is “to bleed.” Ferrante employs the abstract “smarginatura”²⁵³ in the latter sense for Lila as a sentiment which is connected to the one of “frantumaglia”.²⁵⁴ The concept of “frantumaglia”²⁵⁵ comes, for Ferrante, from her mother’s language. It is a sudden feeling of desperation, pointing to the irreducibility of the fragments and confused shards that compose a metaphorical debris of happenings in the mind. For Ferrante this concept is indissolubly tied to the creative process that gives life to her stories.

While the *frantumaglia* is, however, a feeling of the self alone, *smarginatura* implies that one’s own contours are bleeding into the world, and the world is, simultaneously, bleeding into the self.²⁵⁶ In the novels, Lila experiences it more than once, but in one occasion only she is able to fully describe it to Elena. On November 23, 1980, a tremendous earthquake strikes Naples.

²⁵² In Treccani: “smarginare” v. tr. e intr. [der. di margine, col pref. s- (nel sign. 4, e rispettivam. 3)] (io smàrgino, ecc.). – 1. tr. In legatoria, rifilare il margine o i margini di libri e stampati. In tipografia, s. una forma, toglierne le marginature. 2. intr. (aus. avere) In uno scritto o in un testo a stampa, uscire dai margini fissati. <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/smarginare/>

²⁵³ Ann Goldstein translated it in English as “dissolving margins” or “dissolving boundaries”. *Infra*.

²⁵⁴ *La Frantumaglia*, 94-95. *Frantumaglia*, 99-100.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁵⁶ *Smarginatura*, however might also be something that happens to marginalized people. The category of women in a 50s (and later, up to today) Italy was with no doubt marginalized from society. “Margine” is an editorial space in the page which is being dissolved by Ferrante’s writing but, also, arguably, it is an actual space in society. Then *smarginatura* could be seen as the dissolving of the socio-political boundary between a marginalized category and its surroundings. On this matter, see Irigaray, *This sex which is not one* 127: “What do you mean by ‘marginal’? I am thinking especially about women’s liberation movements. Something is being elaborated there that has to do with the ‘feminine,’ with what women-among-themselves might be, what a ‘women’s society’ might mean. If I speak of marginality, it is because, first of all, these movements to some extent keep themselves deliberately apart from institutions and from the play of forces in power, and so forth.” See also Bell Hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*: 145-154.

Il terremoto – il terremoto del 23 novembre 1980 con quel suo frantumare²⁵⁷
infinito – ci entrò dentro le ossa. Cacciò via la consuetudine della stabilità e della
solidità, la certezza che ogni attimo sarebbe stato identico a quello seguente, la
familiarità dei suoni e dei gesti, la loro sicura riconoscibilità. Subentrò il sospetto
verso ogni rassicurazione, la tendenza a credere a ogni profezia di sventura,
un’attenzione angosciata ai segni della friabilità del mondo, e fu arduo riprendere il
controllo.²⁵⁸

Mario Pezzella sees Lila’s *smarginatura* as something which is always connected to a
collective trauma, in this case for example, to the earthquake. “La *smarginatura* di cui soffre
Lina ne *L’amica geniale* non è solo una sua patologia individuale; essa emerge nelle pagine
sul terremoto di Napoli, dove diventa trauma storico collettivo.”²⁵⁹ In the passage where Lila
is undergoing *smarginatura* and bleeding into the outside shaking world, we understand that
she always had to contrast this feeling in her life.

Gridò ansimando che l’auto s’era *smarginata*, anche Marcello²⁶⁰ al volante si stava
smarginando, la cosa e la persona zampillavano da loro stesse mescolando metallo

²⁵⁷ It will be briefly mentioned here again that “frantumare” and “smarginare” are connected in Ferrante’s poetic. *Supra*.

²⁵⁸ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 158. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 172. “The earthquake—the earthquake of November 23, 1980, with its infinite destruction—entered into our bones. It expelled the habit of stability and solidity, the confidence that every second would be identical to the next, the familiarity of sounds and gestures, the certainty of recognizing them. A sort of suspicion of every form of reassurance took over, a tendency to believe in every prediction of bad luck, an obsessive attention to signs of the brittleness of the world, and it was hard to take control again.”

²⁵⁹ <http://tysm.org/la-nitidezza-e-il-gorgo-sulla-frantumaglia-di-elena-ferrante/>

²⁶⁰ Just before Lila’s *smarginatura*, Ferrante constructs a literary section which resembles the opening scene of Federico Fellini’s film entitled *8 1/2*. In the novel, all of the neighbors are found in this frantic flee from the earthquake, where everyone is getting into their car and leaving as fast as they can. There is a particular dreamy (or better, a nightmarish) taste to this situation that made me think of *8 1/2*’s first scene. Furthermore, Marcello Solara stars in his sports car and Elena screams his name. Ferrante also says of some characters that “sembravano personaggi di un film.” The opening scene of *8 1/2* also features a great traffic jam and, overall, an anxiously charged ambience. The camera focuses on Marcello Mastroianni’s car. After looking around and

liquido e carne. Usò proprio smarginare. Fu in quell'occasione che ricorse per la prima volta a quel verbo, si affannò a esplicitarne il senso, voleva che capissi bene cos'era la smarginatura e quanto l'atterriva. Mi strinse ancora più forte la mano, annaspando. Disse che i contorni di cose e persone erano delicati, che si spezzavano come il filo del cotone. Mormorò che per lei era così da sempre, una cosa si smarginava e pioveva su un'altra, era tutto uno sciogliersi di materie eterogenee, un confondersi e rimescolarsi. Esclamò che aveva dovuto sempre faticare per convincersi che la vita aveva margini robusti, perché sapeva fin da piccola che non era così – non era assolutamente così –, e perciò della loro resistenza a urti e spintoni non riusciva a fidarsi... Se non badava ai margini tutto

seeing many people of his life in the cars around him, who all stare at him, Marcello cleans the shield of his car. Suddenly, there is a leak of gas or other substance in Marcello's car and so he starts banging anxiously on the windows, hoping that someone will help him get out of the car. This does not happen, but eventually Marcello succeeds and starts flying. We later gather that this was a nightmare that the protagonist was having. Going back to Ferrante, I will hereby quote the scene that seemed similar to this. *Storia della bambina perduta*, 161. "Le additai Antonio con la moglie e i figli, restai a bocca aperta per com'erano belli tutti, sembravano personaggi di un film, mentre si sistemavano con calma in un furgoncino verde che poi partì. Le additai la famiglia Carracci e affini, mariti, mogli, padri, madri, conviventi, amanti – vale a dire Stefano, Ada, Melina, Maria, Pinuccia, Rino, Alfonso, Marisa, tutti i loro figli – che apparivano e sparivano nella ressa, si chiamavano di continuo per paura di perdersi. Le additai l'auto di lusso di Marcello Solara che tentava rombando di sganciarsi dall'ingorgo di veicoli: aveva accanto mia sorella Elisa col bambino, e sui sedili posteriori le ombre pallide di mia madre e di mio padre. Strillai nomi con lo sportello aperto, cercai di coinvolgere anche Lila. Ma lei non si mosse. Anzi mi resi conto che le persone – soprattutto quelle che conoscevamo bene – la spaventavano ancora di più, specialmente se erano agitate, se urlavano richiami, se correvano. Mi strinse forte la mano e chiuse gli occhi quando la macchina di Marcello montò sul marciapiede strombazzando e filò via tra la gente che sostava in chiacchiere. Esclamò: oh Madonna, espressione che non le avevo mai sentito usare. Che c'è, le chiesi." *The Story of the Lost Child*, 174-75. "I pointed out Antonio with his wife and children, I was astonished at how handsome they all were, like characters in a film, as they calmly got into a green van, which then left. I pointed out to her the Carracci family and their relations, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, people living together, lovers—that is to say Stefano, Ada, Melina, Maria, Pinuccia, Rino, Alfonso, Marisa, and all their children—who appeared and disappeared in the throng, shouting continuously for fear of losing each other. I pointed out Marcello Solara's fancy car that was trying, with a roar, to get free of the jam of vehicles; he had my sister Elisa with her child next to him, and in the back seat the pale shadows of my mother and father. I shouted names with the window open, I tried to involve Lila, too. But she wouldn't move. In fact, I realized that the people—especially those we knew well—frightened her even more, especially if they were agitated, if they were shouting, if they were running. She squeezed my hand hard and closed her eyes when, against all the rules, Marcello's car went up on the sidewalk honking and made its way amid the people who were standing there talking, or were hauling things along. She exclaimed: Oh Madonna, an expression I had never heard her use. What's wrong, I asked."

se ne andava via in grumi sanguigni di mestruo²⁶¹, in polipi sarcomatosi, in pezzi di fibra giallastra.²⁶²

Elena points out that Lila experienced this terrible crisis on New Years' Eve of 1958, when they were at a party at the Solara's and the boys started shooting²⁶³ and, again, when she worked in Bruno Soccavo's factory, at San Giovanni a Teduccio. However, this time, Elena cannot recognize her friend. As she expresses it:

Solo che mentre in passato i punti di contatto tra le due Lile restavano, ora quell'altra donna sembrava essere emersa direttamente dalle viscere della terra, non assomigliava nemmeno un poco all'amica che pochi minuti prima avevo

²⁶¹ I think there might be a connection between these “grumi sanguigni di mestruo” and *L'Amore molesto*'s insistence on Delia's menstruation.

²⁶² *Storia della bambina perduta*, 162. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 175-176. “Gasping for breath, she cried out that the car's boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh. She used that term: dissolving boundaries. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it frightened her. She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard. She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—it was absolutely not like that—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped... And so if she didn't stay alert, if she didn't pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber.”

²⁶³ *L'amica geniale*, 86-87: “Nell'occasione in cui mi fece quel racconto, Lila disse anche che la cosa che chiamava smarginatura, pur essendole arrivata addosso in modo chiaro solo in quella occasione, non le era del tutto nuova. Per esempio, aveva già avuto spesso la sensazione di trasferirsi per poche frazioni di secondo in una persona o una cosa o un numero o una sillaba, violandone i contorni.” *My Brilliant Friend*, 90-91: “On the occasion when she told me that story, Lila also said that the sensation she called dissolving margins, although it had come on her distinctly only that once, wasn't completely new to her. For example, she had often had the sensation of moving for a few fractions of a second into a person or a thing or a number or a syllable, violating its edges.” This description might also account for the fact that Lila is a *genius/genius loci*, because she has the sensation of actually moving *into* other people, things or words.

invidiato per come sapeva selezionare parole ad arte, non le assomigliava nemmeno nei lineamenti, che erano storpiati dall'angoscia.²⁶⁴

As it happens, the vision of a sort of chthonian Lila comes back once again and, this time, she is osmotically linked to the earth. In that moment Lila seems to feel what the earth is feeling too. This sensation is, arguably, what brought her to disappear from the actual world of the *Neapolitan Novels*, at the end of the story. Many times Lila confesses to Elena that she wants to disappear and the narrator has a feeling that this might be what Lila wishes for herself all along. In fact, her ultimate *smarginatura* happens when she drops off the face of the earth. Her final desire, which she will, eventually, fulfill at the end of the novel, is to eliminate her traces and Lila in fact hates Elena for having written more than once in her life about her and about the neighborhood in general. At the very beginning of the story, in the prologue *Eliminating all the traces*, Elena recalls how she found out from Rino, Lila's son, that his mother had disappeared and is nowhere to be found.²⁶⁵

Sono almeno tre decenni che mi dice di voler sparire senza lasciare traccia, e solo io so bene cosa vuole dire. Non ha mai avuto in mente una qualche fuga, un cambio di identità, il sogno di rifarsi una vita altrove. E non ha mai pensato al suicidio, disgustata com'è dall'idea che Rino abbia a che fare col suo corpo e sia

²⁶⁴ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 160. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 174. "die. But now that other person seemed to have emerged directly from the churning guts of the earth; she bore almost no resemblance to the friend who a few minutes before I had envied for her ability to choose words deliberately; there was no resemblance even in the features, disfigured by anguish."

²⁶⁵ In an interview in *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante explains how she conceived of her story. *La Frantumaglia*, 224. "Parecchi anni fa mi venne in mente di raccontare l'intenzione di una persona anziana di sparire –che non significa morire-, senza lasciare traccia della propria esistenza. Mi seduceva l'idea di un racconto che mostrasse quanto è difficile cancellarsi, alla lettera, dalla faccia della terra." *Frantumaglia*, 232. "Many years ago I had the idea of telling the story of an old person who intends to disappear-which doesn't mean die-without leaving any trace of her existence. I was fascinated by the idea of a story that demonstrated how difficult it is to erase yourself, literally, from the face of the earth."

costretto a occuparsene. Il suo proposito è stato sempre un altro: voleva volatilizzarsi; voleva disperdere ogni sua cellula; di lei non si doveva trovare più niente. E poiché la conosco bene, o almeno credo di conoscerla, do per scontato che abbia trovato il modo di non lasciare in questo mondo nemmeno un capello, da nessuna parte.²⁶⁶

Lila's increasing interest in the history of the city of Naples is especially compelling when analyzed in conjunction with her disappearance. Building on Gallippi's idea of understanding Lila's fate as a reflection of that of her mythical ancestor Parthenope, I would argue that Lila has ultimately vanished *in* the city itself, leaving no trace of herself, in her symbolic representation of the *genius loci* which was, in antiquity, strictly connected to the *genius* (or Greek *daimon*, or Latin *famulum*: the "attendant spirit"), of the dead. When her daughter Tina disappears, Lila, devastated by grief, takes up a new "smania",²⁶⁷ that of investigating the story of Naples, both in libraries and in real life. Moreover, Lila wants to relay her knowledge and interest for the city; she underscores the importance of orality, by passing on all of her research to Imma, Elena's daughter:

Nell'ultima fase della nostra permanenza a Napoli, a forza di portarsela in giro le trasmise una curiosità per la città che poi le è rimasta... Appresi dai resoconti di Imma, e con sempre maggiore precisione, che l'oggetto su cui Lila impegnava la

²⁶⁶ *L'Amica geniale*, 16-17. *My Brilliant Friend: Neapolitan Novels, Book One*, 20-21. "It's been at least three decades since she told me that she wanted to disappear without leaving a trace, and I'm the only one who knows what she means. She never had in mind any sort of flight, a change of identity, the dream of making a new life somewhere else. And she never thought of suicide, repulsed by the idea that Rino would have anything to do with her body, and be forced to attend to the details. She meant something different: she wanted to vanish; she wanted every one of her cells to disappear, nothing of her ever to be found. And since I know her well, or at least I think I know her, I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world."

²⁶⁷ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 402. *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 422. "Mania."

testa, su cui scriveva forse per ore e ore, china sul suo computer, non era quel monumento o quell'altro ma Napoli nella sua interezza.²⁶⁸

Lila's interest in the history of "Napoli nella sua interezza"²⁶⁹ is something that, arguably, can be connected to the city's incorporation of myths around the figure of Virgil as *genius loci*. Interestingly, Lila would be advancing a research project which is based on the understanding of Virgil as *genius loci* of Naples and thus, in my interpretation, her own disappearance is not just connected to the myth of Parthenope but to her own embodiment of the *genius Neapolitanus*, constituted, this time, by a woman. In Virgil's epic, one of the characters undergoes heroization, which, in this context, could be seen as a Classical equivalent for Ferrante's *smarginatura*. In the Classical context, heroization²⁷⁰ is a process through which a dead hero gets eternized and worshipped by mortals at his/her death place and ends up becoming a *genius loci* for the place he died in. In the *Aeneid*, Anchises experiences this poetic treatment after his death in the fifth book. A particular passage exemplifies the figure of the serpent as being a portent of both the *genius loci* where Anchises' tomb was set and, contextually, of the *genius* of the dead. The comparisons between Lila and Anchises can be made not directly, in the sense of a real mirroring of characters. Anchises' death is in fact a tangible certainty of the poem, as is his burial place. The same cannot be said for Lila, whose death is neither a certainty of the text, nor a portrayed fact. The woman, we gather from the text, has vanished into thin air and has no

²⁶⁸ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 416-417. *The Story of the Lost Child: Neapolitan Novels, Book Four*, 437-438. "In the last phase of our life in Naples, she guided Imma all over the city, transmitting an interest in it that remained with her... I learned from Imma's reports, and with greater and greater precision, that the object in which Lila's mind was engaged, and on which she was writing for perhaps hours and hours, bent over her computer, was not this or that monument but Naples in its entirety."

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ While there is no entry for the term "heroization", the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* provides one for *herocult*. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 672. "Heroes (...), were a class of beings worshipped by the Greeks, generally conceived as the powerful dead and often as forming a class intermediate between gods and men." The passage also draws attention to the particular sacrifices devoted to heroes and to the hero-shrine. This shrine was normally built around the tomb of a hero and corroborated his connection to the place of his/her death.

fixed resting place. However, in terms of character function in the plot, Lila and Anchises serve a similar purpose: they are the protagonists (and, in a certain way, the heroes) when the “real protagonists” (Elena and Aeneas) are not ready to embark their life projects. I have already showed how Lila is in fact the pivotal character of the novel, influencing the plot’s trajectory in both content and style. A similar comment can be made on Anchises’ character who, as has been noted by Williams,²⁷¹ is the agential protagonist of the *Aeneid* until his death.

For these reasons, I think that it is reasonable to think of Lila’s *smarginatura* and of Anchises’ heroization in a similar fashion. Arguably, through Lila’s *smarginatura*, Ferrante is not only bringing to mind Naples’ foundational myth on Parthenope and Virgil’s legend of Castel Dell’Ovo, but she is presenting these myths in their Classical terms, employing the *Aeneid* as an aetiological text. In order to convey the possible link that can be established between the two concepts of *smarginatura* and heroization, and their ultimate outputs in two *genii loci*, I will now analyze Anchises’ heroization closely.

Heroization

Lila’s *smarginatura* consists in her identification with both a *famulus* (or an attendant spirit) and a *genius loci* (protective spirit of the place where she disappeared). The same can be said of Anchises’ heroization, exemplified by the portent of the snake at his tomb, which represents, simultaneously, the *famulus* of the dead father and the *genius loci* of the place

²⁷¹ Williams 1987, 101-105.

where he died. Aeneas' setting of the funeral games in honor of his father takes place at Drepanon (today's Trapani), where Anchises died. The fifth book of the *Aeneid* describes the first anniversary of Anchises' death. In Roman religion, the commemoration of parents' death was celebrated through the institution of the *Parentalia*. As Williams notes in his description of the character of Anchises in the *Aeneid*: "These (*i.e.*; *the games*), are clearly to be seen as the origin of the annual Roman *Parentalia*, a festival regularly and scrupulously celebrated in Virgil's time at the tomb on the anniversary of a father's death."²⁷²

Williams' commentary²⁷³ on *Aeneid*'s fifth book gives a meticulous overview of the happenings. At vv. 72-103, Williams notes: "The Trojans proceed to the tomb of Anchises, where Aeneas offers libations and addresses his father's shade. Suddenly a huge snake comes forth from the tomb, tastes the offerings, and then disappears. Aeneas recognizes that this indicates the presence of the *manes* of Anchises at the ceremony, and the sacrifice is renewed, and followed by a ritual feast."²⁷⁴ The serpent's appearance happens, then, in conjunction with the heroization of Anchises. Aeneas finds problematic its understanding at face value:

dixerat haec, adytis cum lubricus anguis ab imis
septem ingens gyros, septena volumina traxit
amplexus placide tumulum lapsusque per aras,
ceruleae cui terga notae maculosus et auro
squamam incendebat fulgor, ceu nubibus arcus
mille iacit uarios aduerso sole colores.
obstipuit uisu Aeneas. Ille agmine longo

²⁷² Williams 1987, 104.

²⁷³ Williams, 1960.

²⁷⁴ Williams 1960, 55.

tandem inter pateras et leuia pocula serpens
libauitque dapes rursusque innoxius imo
successit tumulo et depasta altaria liquit.
hoc magis inceptos genitori instaurat honores,
incertus geniumque loci famulumne parentis
*esse putet; ...*²⁷⁵ (vv. 84-96)

The snake can be here seen, as Williams points out, as either *genius loci* or as *famulus parentis*: “There is ultimately little difference between these alternative views of the snake: it represents the spirit of Anchises appearing at his own tomb.”²⁷⁶ Contrary to Boyce, who thinks that the portent of the serpent is here a confirmation of a singular meaning (*genius loci* and not *famulum* of a person), I think that Williams’ idea is more fitting in this context. Aeneas is in fact here left wondering what the meaning of the snake is, as perhaps Romans were too, in front of its depiction at *lararia*,²⁷⁷ but this does not mean that the answer to his question must have been univocal. As often in antiquity, a symbol does not hold one meaning only, but hints to a semantic variety that brings about different concepts. In this context, one could similarly say, for instance, that the serpent must have represented Anchises’ *manes* only (because they are summoned by Aeneas’ libations a few lines after this scene), but that would not be comprehensive either. Williams points out, in fact, that “The soul of the dead (like the *genius*) was often represented as a snake; see Conington ad loc., *Ov. Met. 15. 389-*

²⁷⁵ Powell, 147: “He had just finished speaking/ these things, when a shining snake from the lowest part of the shrine,/ huge, made seven circuits around the altar, moving its body in seven loops,/ and calmly surrounded the funeral mound, then glided among the altars./ Its back was marked dark-blue, and its burning scales flashed/ with a golden light, just as a rainbow casts a thousand colors in clouds/ opposite the sun./ Aeneas was astounded by the sight. The serpent stretched out and slipped though the bowl and the polished drinking cups./ He tasted the meal, then, having fed, without doing harm, he left the altar/ and slid back into the bottom of the tomb. And so Aeneas returns/ more eagerly to the offerings to his father already begun, uncertain/ whether he should consider the snake to be the guardian of the place/ or the attendant to his father.”

²⁷⁶ Williams 1960, 63 n 95.

²⁷⁷ Although we have no proof of this uncertainty, we know that the serpent was always connected to a sort of supernatural and disturbing portent that had ambiguous meaning and probably brought a taste of the Underworld with it. Williams refers to the fear that it could provoke in its viewer. Williams 1960, 60 n 84 f.

90, R. B. Onians, *Origins of European Thought*, p.159, n. 2, pp. 206 f.”²⁷⁸ The very representation of the snake in the text led me to look at the representation of serpents in *lararia*, with their coils painted in ample movements. Williams interprets the seven “gyri” at verse 85, in fact, as the coils of the snake, (and not, as others held, of its circuits around the tomb) and that *septena volumina* (also at v.85), is “a variation on the theme *septem gyros*, adding the picture of movement.”²⁷⁹ I would argue that these are exactly the way these *genii* were depicted in *lararia* and that their meaning could be of both *famuli* and *genii loci* of the household.



²⁷⁸ Williams 1960, 60 n 85.

²⁷⁹ Williams 1960, 60 n 85.

Fig.1 Household shrine with a depiction of: Pater Familias, Lares and *genius loci*. House of the Vettii, Pompeii. (60-79 AD)

A discussion of this problem should certainly consider the evidence and the archaeological critique more in depth. For the purpose of my research I have, instead, limited myself to more general considerations on the issue. As Powell notes about the same passage: “the protective spirit of a place (*genius*), was represented as a snake. The Greeks called a snake that lived in a tomb the *agathos daimon*, the “good spirit”, the ghost of the dead person thought of as a protective power and made manifest as a snake.”²⁸⁰

Going back to Lila, one can now see how she could represent, contextually, both an *agathos daimon* and the protective spirit of Naples. I argue, in fact, that her *smarginatura* is a blending into the city that can be exemplified, in its features, by the portent of the snake in this passage. While Lila can be seen, in life, as a *genius Elenae*, I posit that her disappearance is metaphorical and that it could be seen as a Classical heroization, where the attendant spirit of the dead becomes a protective one for his/her death place, finally representing the *Genius Neapolitanus*.

Through my discussion on the Latin etymologies of the Italian words “geniale” and “genio”, on plotstructure and cultural content of the novels, I hope I have elucidated that Lila can be seen as a *genius* of Elena, whom she infuses of her creative genius, by means of her friendship. Furthermore, her tie to Elena is “geniale” because it pertains to the *genius*; it is a congenial relationship, one that might also reference its generational implications in the aforementioned bed scene. Lila’s essence of *genius* can also be explored in connection to her relation to, and her interest in, the city of Naples. Lila would thus represent the Classical

²⁸⁰ Powell, 147 n 86.

genius as a whole; encompassing, as character, the double of Elena and, contextually, the spirit of the city of Naples.

The dolls and the *penates*

In the novel, Lila and Elena's dolls have a pivotal role in the creation of a ring composition in the narration. In this last section, I am going to explain how these dolls can be figures for the Roman statuettes of the *Penates* and, ultimately, for the two statuettes, or the two dolls that Graves mentions about Ariadne's myth in *Greek Myths*.²⁸¹ Lila's constitution as a *genius* and as *genius loci* is corroborated by the presence of the dolls in the story.

Elena and Lila, as children, play with two dolls named, respectively, Tina and Nu. The dolls, for the girls, are alive and emotionally attached to them. At one point mischievous Lila throws Elena's doll Tina in the cellar of Don Achille. This act sparkles their troubled friendship and their quest for the dolls, first down in Don Achille's basement and then up to his apartment.²⁸² Importantly, however, the dolls will not be found until the very last pages of the series. At this point, Elena and Lila are old and Elena has moved to Turin, where she can better live her life as a successful writer and the owner of a small publishing house. After Elena has written a story entitled *Un'amicizia*,²⁸³ modeled on her own friendship with Lila, the latter disappears and leaves no traces behind, prompting Elena's decision to tell their life story. Elena has an idea to why Lila disappeared: in "Un'amicizia", she wrote of their

²⁸¹ *Infra*.

²⁸² *L'amica geniale*, 23-27. *My Brilliant Friend*, 27-31.

²⁸³ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 321. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 339. "A Friendship".

friendship in a way that suggested that because Lila as a child threw her doll Tina in Don Achille's cellar, then, as an adult, she was condemned to lose her own little daughter Tina.²⁸⁴

Be it as it may, Lila vanished in thin air and her last gesture is sending Elena a packet containing the two ragged dolls.²⁸⁵ Now the story reaches a perfect ring composition.

Lila's throwing of Elena's doll comes as a shock, especially because Don Achille is considered the scariest man of the neighborhood. In the "Index of Characters" of the first book of the series, the man is described as "l'orco delle favole",²⁸⁶ because of the explicit children's perspective adopted in the first book. It might also be that Elena and Lila received this idea of Don Achille from their parents and from the neighborhood's general views on the man.²⁸⁷ However, Elena knows at this point that he has a "borsa nera"²⁸⁸ where he puts everything he finds. Moreover Elena thinks he is a monster that not only lives in his own apartment, but downstairs, in his basement. Because Elena and Lila always go playing with their dolls on the yard adjacent to the basement, Elena fears that her beautiful doll Tina might

²⁸⁴ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 443-44. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 465. *Infra*.

²⁸⁵ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 450-51. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 472-73. *Infra*.

²⁸⁶ *L'amica geniale*, Indice dei personaggi. *My Brilliant Friend*, Index of characters. "the ogre of fairy tales".

²⁸⁷ In the index of the three remaining books of the series, the man is described thus: "*Don Achille Carracci*, l'orco delle favole, borsanerista, strozzino. E' stato ammazzato." "*Don Achille Carracci*, the ogre of fairy tales, dealer in the black market, loan shark. He was murdered." Interestingly enough, his name could be drawn from an historical prominent figure of post-war Naples: its mayor Achille Lauro. As Lucia Re points out in her essay "Invisible Sea: Anna Maria Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli*", "The neo-monarchist (and previously fascist) shipping magnate Achille Lauro was the mayor at the time and the undisputed populist ruler and "boss" of Naples. He owned the Naples soccer team and the influential newspaper *Roma*. He ruthlessly manipulated the populace through demagogic "gifts"..." Re recounts of Lauro's impact on Naples' port and on the city; he pocketed State's endowments for citizens and largely contributed to edile corruption and the disfigurement of the city itself. Because of his marked populism, Achille Lauro was renamed by Neapolitans "Don Achille" or "o' comandante" and he is even father to the political phenomenon of "laurismo". This onomastic detail will not surprise much in its conjunction to his owning of the newspaper *Roma*. In Ferrante's novels, in fact, Don Achille Carracci is portrayed as a ruthless moneylender and a Mafioso. And while he is not directly tied to *Roma* in the novel, we will not forget about Elena's reading of this newspaper, the one most at hand, in the neighborhood, and of her professor's advise to read, instead, *L'Unità*, *Il Mattino*, *Il corriere della sera*. The *Roma* was in fact, as Re pointed out, particularly "influential" at the time in Naples because it held the political views of the Christian Democracy, the party that supported Achille Lauro.

²⁸⁸ "Borsaro s. m. (f. -a) [der. di borsa2]. – Di origine romanesca (più com. b. nero), neologismo nato durante la seconda guerra mondiale, per indicare chi esercitava il mercato clandestino (borsa nera) di generi contingentati. Con lo stesso sign. anche borsanerista e, più raro, borsista nero." "black marketeer- of Roman origin, the neologism came about during Second World War, to indicate who participated in clandestine market (black market), trading quota goods." (My transl.) <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/borsaro/> For Elena the "borsa nera" (black market) became an actual "black bag" where Don Achille keeps all of his stealings.

fall down in the basement and that Don Achille will steal it. This fear unfortunately comes true when Lila, having Tina in her hands, throws her down in the cellar:

Lila sapeva che avevo quella paura, la mia bambola ne parlava ad alta voce. Per questo, proprio nel giorno in cui senza nemmeno contrattare, solo con gli sguardi e i gesti, ci scambiammo per la prima volta le nostre bambole, lei, appena ebbe Tina, la spinse oltre la rete e la lasciò cadere nell'oscurità.²⁸⁹

The story (and the friendship) unfolds from this act of Lila. Elena, as customary to her character, imitates Lila and throws Lila's doll Nu in the basement as well. So the children have to descend to the basement in a sort of tremendous katabasis and then reemerge and go up the stairs to Don Achille's house in order to find the dolls.²⁹⁰ The dolls will not be found at this time; Don Achille will give them some "lire"²⁹¹ to go buy new ones. The girls will instead buy their first independent reading, *Little Women*.²⁹²

Tina the doll and Lila's daughter Tina will have an eerily similar destiny.

Interestingly, the exchange of fates I have explored regarding Elena and Lila's lives, might encompass that of their daughters, too: Elena's doll and Lila's future daughter, Tina, bear the same name and are destined a similar, tragic end. As Elena recalls when the two pregnant women are waiting to be visited by a gynecologist:

²⁸⁹ *L'amica geniale*, 27. *My Brilliant Friend*, 31. "Lila knew that I had that fear, my doll talked about it out loud. And so, on the day we exchanged our dolls for the first time—with no discussion, only looks and gestures—as soon as she had Tina, she pushed her through the grate and let her fall into the darkness."

²⁹⁰ Without incurring in banal identifications, this scene could well be a *descensus ad inferos*, followed by an anabasis back to earth. The fact that Elena believes that Don Achille has a doppelganger in the chthonian world might also speak to this idea of Ferrante. Moreover, Elena in this passage also imagines him as keeping in his two long arms the heads of the two captive dolls. To readers of *Inferno*, this will immediately spark a resemblance to Lucifer, gnawing in his three heads the bodies of Brutus, Cassius and Judas Iscariot. One could also, baldly, look at Lila as a little Virgil who guides Elena-little-Dante throughout the otherworldly trip.

²⁹¹ Elena does not remember how much exactly. *L'amica geniale*, 63. *My Brilliant Friend*, 67.

²⁹² This book substitutes the dolls, becoming a signifier for the literary aspirations of the girls. From the beginning of the story, then, Ferrante has interestingly linked the dolls to a book and thus, ultimately, to literature itself.

Una volta, pensando agli esseri minuscoli che stavano definendosi dentro il nostro corpo, mi tornò in mente quando – sedute l’una accanto all’altra nel cortile come adesso in sala d’attesa – giocavamo a fare le mamme delle nostre bambole. La mia si chiamava Tina, la sua Nu. Lei aveva gettato Tina nella tenebra della cantina e io per dispetto avevo fatto lo stesso con Nu. Ti ricordi, le chiesi. Lei sembrò perplessa, aveva il sorrisetto tiepido di chi stenta a riacciuffare una memoria. Poi, quando le dissi all’orecchio, divertita, con quale paura e con quale coraggio eravamo salite fino alla porta del terribile don Achille Carracci, il padre del suo futuro marito, attribuendogli il furto delle nostre due bambole, cominciò a divertirsi, ridevamo come due stupide disturbando i ventri abitati delle altre pazienti più composte di noi.²⁹³

Just before the doctor calls Elena in, she suggests that, since she has two girls already, if Lila happens to expect a boy, they could exchange sons.²⁹⁴ Ferrante’s interest in dolls as kernels of maternal issues of her characters is quite obvious; their quasi-magical presence, with their lives intertwined with that of their owners, is already in *The lost child (La figlia oscura)*, and in the children story entitled *The beach at night (La spiaggia di notte)*. In the *Neapolitan Novels* there is also a disturbing and almost magical exchange between Tina-the doll and Tina-the daughter, which Elena ominously alludes to at the gynecologist’s. Once, in fact,

²⁹³ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 144-45. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 156-57. “Once, thinking of the tiny creatures who were defining themselves in our bodies, I remembered when—sitting next to each other in the courtyard, as we were now in the waiting room—we played at being mothers with our dolls. Mine was called Tina, hers Nu. She had thrown Tina into the shadows of the cellar and I, out of spite, had done the same with Nu. Do you remember, I asked. She seemed bewildered, she had the faint smile of someone struggling to recapture a memory. Then, when I whispered to her, with a laugh, how fearful we were, how bold, climbing up to the door of the terrible Don Achille Carracci, the father of her future husband, and accusing him of the theft of our dolls, she began to find it funny, we laughed like idiots, disturbing the inhabited stomachs of the other patients, who were more sedate.”

²⁹⁴ Ferrante’s insistence on the exchange of sons/daughters might also be a reference to Pirandello’s *La favola del figlio cambiato*, which is based on Italian folklore.

Elena, already an established writer, has to hold an interview with a journalist for the famous Italian magazine *Panorama* and is pictured with Tina and not with Imma, her own daughter. Ferrante describes these scenes in a disturbing way, probably because she is shedding light on the subsequent disappearing of the girl. The author has us believe that the child's disappearance could even be connected to her mediatic exposure on *Panorama*. The Solaras got very mad at Elena for having denounced the local mafia and Enzo, Lila's husband, is sure that they have kidnapped Tina because he did not give in to their request of a share of his and his wife's corporation.²⁹⁵ Tina's disappearance, however, is never resolved. After Lila mysteriously loses her child, and in a typical metaliterary turn of the novel, an old Elena decides to then write a story called *Un'amicizia*,²⁹⁶ based on her relationship with Lila. The main thread of the story links her memory of child-Lila throwing Elena's doll, Tina, in the basement, and adult-Lila's loss of her own daughter Tina. For this, Elena ponders, Lila will never speak to her again; she has exposed her and their lives, literarily tracing back the reason Lila lost her daughter to her own spite as a kid.

Mi sono convinta che la ragione del suo ritrarsi fosse altrove, 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

²⁹⁵ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 323. "Enzo, pallidissimo, ascoltò per qualche minuto e poi gridò che la figlia gliel'avevano presa loro. Lo disse allora e in tante altre occasioni, lo urlò dappertutto: i Solaras gli avevano preso Tina perché lui e Lila si erano sempre rifiutati di dar loro una quota dei profitti della Basic Sight. Voleva che qualcuno obiettasse qualcosa per poterlo ammazzare. Ma nessuno obiettò mai in sua presenza. Quella sera non obiettarono nemmeno i due fratelli. «Noi comprendiamo il tuo dolore» disse Marcello, «se mi avessero preso Silvio avrei fatto il pazzo come lo stai facendo tu.»" *The Story of the Lost Child*, 341. "Enzo, extremely pale, listened for a few minutes and then cried that it was they who had taken his daughter. He said it then and on many other occasions, he shouted it everywhere: the Solaras had taken Tina away from them because he and Lila had refused to give them a percentage of the profits of Basic Sight. He wanted someone to object so that he could murder him. But no one ever objected in his presence. That evening not even the two brothers objected. "We understand your grief," Marcello said. "If they had taken Silvio I would have gone mad, just like you."

²⁹⁶ *Supra*.

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.²⁹⁷

However, there is a final, unexpected twist in the plot, where old Lila sends old Elena a package with the two dolls. At this point, Elena feels the story went full-circle: the dolls symbolize their friendship and, in a way, their legacy as friends. On the very last page of the novel, Elena has the certainty that she will not see Lila ever again and that this is the last riddle that her friend left for her to unravel. Thus, the dolls must have a connection to Lila's disappearance and are, ultimately, what remains as proof of both Lila's existence and of the two friends' relationship. It should be remembered in this context, in fact, that Lila has left no other trace of her life to be found. Lila could have sent them to Elena before dying, as expression of her last will or she could have done so in order to celebrate their friendship. Be it as it may in Lila's intention, the dolls represent some kind of bequest. Because of the dolls' highly symbolic essence and their pertinence to Lila's legacy, there is a possible Classical resonance here. As these dolls are summoned back after many years, and travel a long way in both time and space, they could be related to the Classical idea of the *Penates*.

As the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* points out, the *genius* of the *paterfamilias*, the *lares* and the *penates* were all connected in the "Religion of the Household and Family":

²⁹⁷ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 443-44. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 465. "I'm convinced that the reason for her repudiation lay elsewhere, in the way I recounted the episode of the dolls. I had deliberately exaggerated the moment when they disappeared into the darkness of the cellar, I had accentuated the trauma of the loss, and to intensify the emotional effects I had used the fact that one of the dolls and the lost child had the same name. The whole led the reader, step by step, to connect the childhood loss of the pretend daughters to the adult loss of the real daughter. Lila must have found it cynical, dishonest, that I had resorted to an important moment of our childhood, to her child, to her sorrow, to satisfy my audience."

At the center of every domestic cult was the hearth, the presiding gods of which were the lares, the penates, and the genius of the paterfamilias. The penates are associated etymologically with the penetralia, the innermost reaches of the home, and thus are connected with the intimate essence of the family; it was the penates that Aeneas carried with him from Troy (Aeneid 2.293 and 3.148–150).”²⁹⁸

The *penates* are connected to the *lares* because they were household protective spirits of the dead ancestors in the form of statuettes and they are believed to be the storeroom (*penetralia*) deities. Moreover, the *penates* connect the private cult of the household ancestors to the public one of the ancestors of Rome, through Aeneas’ story and, in particular, via the *Aeneid*.

The Penates are related to the Lares in that they were household protective beings. Like the Lares, they were worshipped in every house, although the Penates's original role had primarily been as guardians of the storeroom. A family generally would have one Lare and two Penates figures sharing the household shrine. The family members would make offerings taken from their daily meals to the Penates at the hearth, since the Penates were closely linked to Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. The Roman state was said to have its own Penates, the Penates publici. Tradition claimed that they had been brought from Troy during the time of its downfall by the mythic hero Aeneas, prince of Troy and ancestor of Rome.²⁹⁹

As we have seen, both of these definitions make reference to the fact that the cult of the *Penates* was both a private and a public deal of Roman religion. The *Aeneid* has substantiated

²⁹⁸ “penates.” In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Gagarin, 2010.
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-1088?rskey=eFHxwF&result=4#acref-9780195170726-eSub-0212>

²⁹⁹ *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*, 283.

this belief, the texts underline. In the *Aeneid*, the *Penates* are the veiled statuettes, which Aeneas decides to bring with him from Troy to Italy. Importantly, these deities are related to the cult of Dardanus, Aeneas' mythical ancestor who came from Corythia (modern Cortona) to the Phrygian region. This, at least, is the story told in the *Aeneid*.³⁰⁰ In two instances of the text we see the *penates* appear directly: the first one is in the second book when Aeneas has an ominous dream during the night of the fall of Troy. In dream, the ghost of Hector hands them and the sacred fire of Vesta³⁰¹ to him, so that he can bring them to a new land and build great walls for them.

‘...
sacra suosque tibi commendat Troia penatis³⁰²;
hos cape fatorum comites, his moenia quaere
magna pererrato statues quae denique ponto.’³⁰³
(*Aen.* II, vv. 293-95.)

In the third book, however, the statuettes actually turn into subjects of the story and start speaking to Aeneas. They are the ones who, ultimately, tell him that his final destination³⁰⁴ is “Italia”³⁰⁵ and not, as he thought, Crete.

³⁰⁰ Erskine, 144: “In contrast to the Palladion, the Penates do not figure in the Greek tradition about Troy, but are very much a Latin addition to the myth: at what stage they were added is controversial.” Cf. Dubourdieu, 292-307.

³⁰¹ Powell 75, n 277: “Vesta was the goddess of the hearth. In her role as state goddess, she protected the permanent flame that burned on the altar of Vesta at Rome, thought to guarantee the permanence of the state. Aeneas was said to have brought this flame from Troy.”

³⁰² The etymology of *Penates* seems connected to the *penetralia* that we find later in the text (vv. 297). The *penetralia* were the innermost parts of a temple or of a house and the related *penus* was the storeroom of the house.

³⁰³ *R.A.B. Mynors*, 136. Powell, 74: “Troy gives her sacred relics and its Penates to you. Take them/ as the companions of your fate. Find great walls for them that / you will build, once you have at last crossed the sea.” Later, in the same book, Aeneas speaks to Anchises in these terms: “Tu, genitor, cape sacra manu patriosque penatis;/ me, bello e tanto digressum et caede recenti,/ attrectare nefas, donec me flumine vivo/ abluero.” (*Aen.* II, 717-20) Powell, 88. “You, father, take the sacred/ objects and the Penates of our fathers. It is not permitted for me to touch them,/ having just come from the fight and recent slaughter, until I can wash myself/ in flowing water.”

Nox erat et terris animalia somnus habebat:
effigies sacrae diuum Phrygiique penates,
quos mecum a Troia mediisque ex ignibus urbis
extuleram, uisi ante oculos astare iacentis
in somnis multo manifesti lumine, qua se
plena per insertas fundebat luna fenestras;
tum sic adfari et curas his demere dictis:
‘quod tibi delato Ortygiam dicturus Apollo est,
hic canit et tua nos en ultro ad limina mittit.
nos te Dardania incensa tuaque arma secuti,
nos tumidum sub te permensi classibus aequor,
idem uenturos tollemus in astra nepotes
imperiumque urbi dabimus. tu moenia magnis
magna para longumque fugae ne linque laborem.
mutandae sedes. non haec tibi litora suasit
Delius aut Cretae iussit considerare Apollo.
est locus, Hesperiam Grai cognomine dicunt,
terra antiqua, potens armis atque ubere glaebae;
Oenotri coluere viri; nunc fama minores
Italiam dixisse ducis de nomine gentem.
hae nobis propriae sedes, hinc Dardanus ortus
Iasiusque pater, genus a quo principe nostrum.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ The myth collapses this final destination with a *nostos* to Dardanus’ original land: Italy.

³⁰⁵ This is also one of the exceptional mentions of the name “Italia” for modern Italy.

³⁰⁶ *R.A.B. Mynors*, 157-58. Powell, 97: “It was night and sleep had taken possession of all earth’s creatures. The sacred statues of the gods, the Phrygian Penates that I had brought out of the middle of the conflagration of the

(*Aen.* III, 146-168.)

Although the *penates* are only named a few times in the *Aeneid*, they have a pivotal role in the plot. The *penates* consolidate Aeneas' drive in his foundational project and guide him to choose Italy as a destination. Their main value as religious objects, however, is that of ancestral signifiers of homeland (or, better of the nation); in a way, they are mobile *genii loci* of the new offspring of the "Dardanidii" (i.e, Trojans) in Italy.

The *penates* are referred to as "uultus uelatasque comas"³⁰⁷ (*Aen.* II, 173-74) and this conveys a typical representation of travelers in the ancient world.³⁰⁸ Their main feature as idols is, in fact, that of moving with Aeneas and helping him found Rome, reaffirming a strong link with Roman ancestors.

I believe that Tina and Nu, in the *Neapolitan Novels*, have a similar task. The idea of founding a new city,³⁰⁹ which comes back as a refrain in Ferrante, from *Frantumaglia* to the series, can finally be fulfilled thanks to these childhood *penates*.

As I have shown, Lila has not been exploring travel at all in her life, confining herself to the neighborhood and to the bay of Naples, in general. Interestingly, it is the same Elena who, little before she finds the package containing the dolls, thinks that Lila might have finally found the courage to travel the world and free herself from the shackles of her

city, seemed to stand there before my eyes as I slept. They were perfectly clear in the light where the full moon poured through the unshattered windows. Then they spoke to me and put aside my cares with these words: 'That which Apollo would say to you if you sailed to Ortygia, he reveals here, and furthermore he sends us to your threshold. Once Troy was burned, we followed you and your arms, crossing the swollen sea in your ships with you, and we shall raise your descendants to the stars. We shall give empire to your city. Build great walls for great men, and do not shrink from the long labor of exile./ But you must change the site of your settlement. The Delian Apollo did not urge these shores on you! He did not order you to settle in Crete. There is a place that the Greeks call Hesperia, an ancient land, powerful in arms and from the richness of its soil. There the Oenotrians live. Rumor holds, though, that their children have called the whole land Italy, after the name of their leader. This is our true home. Dardanus and father Iasius came from there, the origin of our race.'

³⁰⁷ *R.A.B. Mynors*, 158. Powell, 99. "...their veiled hair and the presence of their faces."

³⁰⁸ From the archaeological viewpoint, the *penates* are usually found displaced from shrines, laying on streets or in other random places. This, for some scholars, (i.e., Boyce) could be proof of their mobility as deities; the worshippers would probably bring them around with them during trips and on their pilgrimages to public shrines.

³⁰⁹ Gallippi, *Supra*.

condition. The dolls could both be the proof of this new condition and of the fact that Lila has gone. They have probably traveled a great deal to reach Elena in Turin but paradoxically Lila is not there to bring them. In a way, the dolls “act out” for her, just like the *Penates* do in the aforementioned passage of the *Aeneid*, (*Aen.* III, 146-68.) The objects, in the novels, do not speak, but their summoning brings back memories, thoughts and concepts that speak volumes. Lila, via the dolls, is a kind of traveling *genius loci* of Naples and she finally reaches Elena in her new settlement, just to remind her of their important legacy, as friends and as Neapolitans. In the modern context of the novel, which is always entwined with its Classical model, only then can Elena found a new city.

Another feature of the *penates*, we have seen, is that they are related to family and home, but also to Troy as a nation, as a collective entity.³¹⁰ The dolls in the story might also well possess this collective connotation, bringing back to Elena a “Napolitanità”³¹¹ which would otherwise be lost forever. They are, ultimately, the expression of the neighborhood and of Elena’s childhood games, thus conveying both a public meaning and a private one, by their mere presence in Turin. The detail of the dolls, then, could be part of Ferrante’s composition of a sort of *lararium* for Lila, which extends, in the narrative, from the fire in the shoe shop to the story of Tina and Nu. Regarding my interpretation of Lila as a possible *genius (loci)*, there is another scene in the novel that led me to think of the Classical structure of the *lararium* as connected, once again, to Elena’s friend. It is the one where Lila’s picture as newly wed catches fire for no apparent reason.³¹² The visualization of that picture and of the scene, in general, have led me back to the structure of the ancient Roman shrine devoted to the *genius* of the *paterfamilias*. As I have shown already with an illustration from the household shrine of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* was

³¹⁰ On the confusion between the two ideas, especially in book II of the *Aeneid*, note Schauer, 72-87. On the limits of their identification with the nation in book III, see Casali.

³¹¹ Lucamante, 86.

³¹² *Supra*.

usually represented as a togate man holding a cornucopia and a patera in his hands, for libations. On his left and right, stood the dancing *Lares*, interpreted as protective spirits of the house.³¹³ And while Lila's image was depicting her alone, the fact that her picture caught fire "come da un focolare segreto",³¹⁴ "as if from a secret hearth" could arguably hint to the process of libation and burning offers made to the household shrine of Roman houses. The scene is quite impressive and the use of "focolare", "hearth", instead of "fuoco" is something that incited me to find a possible connection of this image to that of a standard *lararium*. Moreover, the use of a woman³¹⁵ for this significant image, however covered up in a sort of modern piece of art, led me to consider her centrality as a character. Lila is, in this sense, the feminine *genius* of her community. The people around her, their deeds nonetheless, give great importance to the image and to its impact on their lives.

The dolls in Graves' *Greek Myths*

In the first chapter of my thesis, I have commented on Ariadne's myth at Amathus that Ferrante references closely in *Frantumaglia*. The myth, we gather from Ferrante herself, comes from Graves' *Greek Myths*. If one looks at this passage and at the other instances of the name of Ariadne in the same book, it will become clear that the writer might have left a trace of her dolls behind. In all of these versions of Ariadne's myth, the woman has in fact

³¹³ The Romans had numerous kinds of *lares*. "lares and penates" in *Storytelling: an Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*: "Lares compitales: guardians of the crossroads. Lares domestici: guardians of the house. Lares familiares: guardians of the family. Lares permarini: guardians of the sea. Lares praestitis: guardians of the Roman state. Lares rurales: guardians of the land or fields. Lares viales: guardians of travelers."

³¹⁴ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 139-140. The Story of a New Name, 140. "as if from a secret hearth".

³¹⁵ Ferrante's innovation in the field of Classical reception is extraordinary. As we have seen, the author plays with notions of the ancient world and disregards the fact that most of these roles, in Ancient Rome, were taken up by men.

either two small statues of herself as worshipping idols after her death, or even two small dolls with her (one owned by her and the other by her sister Phaedra). For Graves, Ariadne or, better, “*ariagne*” means “most pure; *or* high fruitful mother of the barley.”³¹⁶ As he explains in the book, the woman is connected to the fertility cults of fruit trees in Crete.

Going back to the very version of the story that Ferrante quotes in *Frantumaglia*, at Amathus Ariadne dies of labor or, to some, she hangs herself. Graves carefully analyzes the aftermath of her death and her heroization.

The Cypriots still celebrate Ariadne’s festival on the second day of September, when a youth lies down in her grove and imitates a travailing woman; ... and worship two small statues of her, one in silver, the other in brass, which Theseus left them.³¹⁷

Surprisingly, we find out from Graves that Ariadne is idolized via two statuettes representing her. Interestingly, these statuettes are present in this version of the myth of Ariadne, which Ferrante explicitly references. And while we are not privy to an explicit reference by Ferrante that she has thought of these statuettes when writing her stories, I would argue that she has given us enough clues as to think of this. First of all these two statuettes represent Ariadne herself. We have explored how Ferrante’s fashioning of the dolls in her stories is usually symbiotic with her characters; these objects usually stand for the people who own them. Secondly, the statuettes in Ariadne’s myth are mobile. While we do not know if Theseus had them before Ariadne’s death, they certainly travel with him by ship and finally find rest in the place where the woman died. One will remember that Lila and Elena’s dolls also travel a great deal in time and space to reach the latter. Ariadne’s statuettes ultimately

³¹⁶ Graves, 381. *Ariadne*.

³¹⁷ Graves, 341-42. (98.s)

corroborate the institution of her own heroization at Amathus. In a similar fashion Lila is also somehow leaving the two dolls to Elena as a legacy of her own life and deeds.

Looking at other passages in the book where Graves mentions Ariadne, he references not just statuettes, but also two dolls, owned, respectively, by Ariadne and by her sister Phaedra. Daedalus is said to have made them for the Cretan family. These, for Graves, would be linked to the Attic cult of Erigone. The author states that because in both the myths of Ariadne and of Erigone the women ultimately hanged themselves, the dolls would perhaps be used as cults hanging from trees, in order to spread their fertile power to the surrounding crops.

10. At Petsofa in Crete a hoard of human heads and limbs, of clay, have been found, each with a hole through which a string could be passed. If once fixed to wooden trunks, they may have formed part of Daedalus's jointed dolls, and represented the Fertility-goddess. Their use was perhaps to hang from a fruit-tree, with their limbs moving about in the wind, to ensure good crops. ... Tree worship is the subject of several Minoan works of art, and Ariadne, the Cretan goddess, is said to have hanged herself, as the Attic Erigone did.³¹⁸

The concept of dolls as kernels of fertility is a shared feature of the dolls that we find in the *Neapolitan Novels* too. As I have shown, in fact, not only do Lila and Elena conceive of them as daughters but, once grown ups and pregnant at the doctor, they playfully remember their childhood games. Ultimately and tragically for Lila, Elena Ferrante decides to throw into oblivion her daughter Tina in the *Neapolitan Novels*. In a perfectly metaliterary turn, Elena is

³¹⁸ Graves, 298. (88.8)

writing this same story when she publishes *Un'amicizia*.³¹⁹ The fact that the dolls finally come back is, as I have shown, a plunge into Classical mythology and literature, but also provides the author with an end for her story. This end, no matter how unhappy and disheartening, closes a circle of metaliterary play that had started with the dolls and confirms, once again, the eternal game of reversal, mirroring and painful subalternity that Elena felt as a friend of Lila. But it is also a reminder of women's power of fertility, of the possibility of a new life, a rebirth without Lila. In a way, Elena thinks that the writer of the story, all along, was Lila and not herself. She is the *genius* who, through the dolls, has suddenly appeared for a rapid blip, and then disappeared, forever.

Sono salita in ascensore, mi sono chiusa nel mio appartamento. Ho esaminato le due bambole con cura, ne ho sentito l'odore di muffa, le ho disposte contro i dorsi dei miei libri. 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.³²⁰

³¹⁹ *Supra*.

³²⁰ *Storia della bambina perduta*, 451. *The Story of the Lost Child*, 473. "I went up in the elevator, I shut myself in my apartment. I examined the two dolls carefully, I smelled the odor of mold, I arranged them against the spines of my books. Seeing how cheap and ugly they were I felt confused. Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity. I thought: now that Lila has let herself be seen so plainly, I must resign myself to not seeing her anymore."

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, the starting point of my research was that Elena and Lila, in the *Neapolitan Novels*, are attempting the foundation of a “new city”. Following the Classical resonance of the novels on multiple levels, I have demonstrated a new possible exegesis for the title of the series and, simultaneously, for the interpretation of the whole story.

The infamous city that Ferrante talks about in *La Frantumaglia* and that Lila references in *My Brilliant Friend*, is never really founded. Nevertheless, the novels contain many references to its possible founding and to the legacy that Lila leaves Elena. In my first chapter, I have rooted the concept of a city with love or a feminine city in *La Frantumaglia*. This prior text by the author sheds light on the meaning of this same concept in the tetralogy. The chapter “Le Città” is an important statement of Ferrante’s poetics and of her interpretation of Classical myths dealing with heroines and their surrounding spaces. There, Ferrante brings back to life the myth of Ariadne and that of Dido, while also alluding to the figure of Medea. Dido’s founding of Carthage is inescapably connected, for the author, with the founding of a city that hosts love. Here I have detected an intertextual connection with Lila’s words in *My Brilliant Friend*.

In my interpretation of the novels, however, I keep a distance from any possible identification of this imagined city and its founder with any given place or person. In the course of my research, I was more interested in the process that possibly led to the founding of this city. In my second chapter, I looked at Lila as a possible figure for a Roman *genius/genius loci* and at the way Ferrante arguably instituted a sort of *lararium* for and around her character. Lila’s configuration as *genius* comes from numerous details.

First, the etymology of “geniale” from the Italian title *L’amica geniale* is *genialis*. *Genialis* is the adjective derived from *genius* and thus refers to the girls’ communal generation and, furthermore, to their mirroring, reversal, and reciprocity of destinies. The scene where Lila invests Elena with the title of “amica geniale”, thus giving a title to the story itself, is paramount for the understanding of *genialis*. There, one can see that *genialis* is connected to the bed where the scene takes place (in the generational implications of the Latin word.) Furthermore, the scene signs a shift in perspective for the reader and a sense of mirroring and reversal for the girls’ destinies, which are already semantically present in the word *genialis*. Moreover, because *genius*, the noun that gives life to *genialis* was, in Roman religion, the double of the self, I thought of Lila as a double of Elena.

Another layer of meaning for “genius”, this time from a more modern perspective, is that of the creative genius of the author. Through further intertextual references to the novels themselves, I have also explained how I think that the tetralogy’s epigraph from Goethe’s *Faust* functions in this context. The *genius* in Goethe’s epic represents the figure of Mephistopheles who stands not only for the devil, but also for a kind of mirroring and goading spirit of the protagonist. Lila’s pertinence as a double spirit of Elena would be thus confirmed not only by Classical models, but also by the reference to Goethe’s *Faust*.

My discussion on a possible comparison between Ferrante’s phenomenon of *smarginatura* and heroization is a way of rooting this concept into a Classical one that works, again, in conjunction with that of *genius/genius loci*. The heroization of Anchises and the portent of the snake at his tomb (*Aen.* V), served this purpose, while also helping illuminate the meaning of *genius* and its connection to the *genius loci*. For this, I have also included the picture of the *lararium* from the House of the Vettii, in Pompeii (60-79 AD). In fact, the

scene³²¹ where Lila's wedding picture takes fire for no apparent reason can arguably be related to this image from Pompeii and to the general configuration of Roman *lararia*.

Finally, in the last section of my thesis, I have tried to elucidate that the dolls have a similar task, in the books, to that of the *penates*, in the *Aeneid*. In their most immediate meaning, the dolls probably represent Lila's legacy for Elena and a sense of closure for their friendship. On another level, however, I think they might well represent the spirits of the dead ancestors, confirming the will, in Elena, to found a new city and a new generation of hero(ines).

My final reference to Graves' *Greek Myths* brings back the myth of Ariadne. In the version of Ariadne's myth at Amathus, the same that Ferrante references in "Le Città", there is a final detail of two statuettes, which will not escape readers of Ferrante. This last detail is paired up with two other dolls that Ariadne and her sister Phaedra are said to own as children. In this context, the connection of these statuettes/dolls to the two dolls in the *Neapolitan Novels* is quite clear. Moreover, Ariadne has just died when Theseus brings back these statuettes to corroborate a heroization of the girl. The similarity lies in the fact that, at the end of Ferrante's series, Lila disappears and is careful not to leave anything of her behind, except for the two dolls that Elena finds at the end of the story.

Finally, all of the threads come together. Ferrante has arguably reworked the Roman concepts of *genius/genius loci* and the imagery from the *lararium*, (comprising of the altar and the *penates*), and linked them to the character of Lila. Her *smarginatura* (or, in ancient terms, heroization) is in fact connected to the reappearance of the dolls, the same ones that Elena had used so despicably in her short story called "Un'amicizia."

Lastly, the *Neapolitan Novels* are a sort of new, feminine epic on friendship, love, motherhood, writing, life and loss. This epic, however, is not a feminine version of the

³²¹ *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 139-140. *The Story of a New Name*, 140. *Supra*.

Aeneid,³²² but a modern appropriation and thorough reworking of the same themes by Elena Ferrante.

³²² As has been said by Stephanie McCarther: <https://eidolon.pub/elena-ferrantes-Virgil-2f6babd05f16>.

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