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Bullaro, Grace Russo and Stephanie Love, eds. *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 328. ISBN 978-1-137-59062-6 and 978-1-137-57580-7. \$ 99.99 (hardcover). \$ 79.99 (eBook).

The international acclaim for the Neapolitan novels has brought much critical attention to the works of Elena Ferrante. Several publications have appeared regarding the so-called “Ferrante fever,” both in Italy and in Anglophone areas. *Nel nome della madre* (Del Vecchio, 2017) is an interdisciplinary collection of essays edited by Tiziana de Rogatis and Daniela Brogi stemming from a conference organized in Siena last year, that focuses on the maternal and deals with its presence in Ferrante’s first three novels (de Rogatis). The volume *Dell’ambivalenza*, a collection of essays edited by Anna Maria Crispino and Marina Vitale (Iacobelli, 2016), deals with the concept of ambiguity as a determining factor for the construction of Ferrante’s characters in her Neapolitan quartet. The issue of *Allegoria* 73 (2016) puts the Neapolitan tetralogy at the center of several articles.

One of the most recent additions to the body of Ferrante criticism is Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love’s edited volume *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*. The book highlights the merits of the tetralogy and also extols new readings for Ferrante’s three previous novels. The volume is divided into three parts entitled, respectively, “Notes in the Margins: Historicizing Ferrante’s Fiction,” “All That’s Left in the Margins: Ferrante’s Poetics,” and “*Smarginatura*: Motherhood and Female Friendship.” In the introduction, the editors tease out the many qualities of Ferrante’s narrative. Understanding the role of affective poetics, underscoring the narrative and metanarrative strategies utilized to represent women’s lives, and deconstructing the author’s unsentimental ambivalence toward her characters as the ways in which “Ferrante’s novels enter into the disquieting inner worlds of women on the verge of a nervous breakdown” (4) represent the aims of the editors in selecting the studies comprising this volume. In their attention to Ferrante’s poetics, the editors underline the fertile concept of “margin” as “one of the[ir] guiding principles” to configure a map of Ferrante’s work (6). The concept of *smarginatura*, a marker of Ferrante’s writing, directs the editors’ intention in defining its versatile facets as it “implies boundaries bleeding into each other, the familiar morphing into the unfamiliar, the collapse of certainty and assurances” (5). The first part, “Notes in the Margins: Historicizing Ferrante’s Fiction,” contains three articles. In her own article, “The Era of the ‘Economic Miracle’ and the Force of Context,” Grace Russo Bullaro provides an historical frame for the Ferrante tetralogy. Anglophone lovers of the Neapolitan quartet can really benefit from Russo Bullaro’s insight into recent Italian history. The essay presents the backdrop for the novels covering major events of Italian history since 1944 (birth of Elena and Lila) to the present day. Its trajectory functions as a conduit to better grasp the themes central to the novels and their characters’ development. One such example is represented by a convenient framing of the progression of lower-class Lila’s entrepreneurial skills from working in her father’s shoe shop to the factory to the booming computer business. The second article, “Indexicalities of Language in Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels: Dialect and Italian as Markers of Social Value and Difference” by Jillian R. Cavanaugh presents an analysis of dialect and indexicality at the core of the Neapolitan novels. Indexicality allows for an understanding of Ferrante’s metalinguistic approach. Her use of this linguistic concept presents an “indirect association of Italian and mobility” (56) and constructs the pattern that recurs in dialogues between Lila and Elena: the first never abandons dialect while the second slowly moves her life into Italian (67). According to Cavanaugh, “dialect is so indexically associated with conflict and its potential across the novels that just switching into it can be a way for a character to prepare himself or herself for confrontation” (61). In the third essay, entitled “‘An Educated Identity’: The School as a Modernist Chronotope in Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels,” Stephanie Love studies the important space framed by the school as a chronotope for the quartet. According to Love, Elena reveals all her ambivalence and reticence to the reading of Edmondo’s De Amicis’s *Cuore* as it smacked of a

culture extraneous to that of the South. While during her school years she was unaware of her visceral reaction to this reading, later on it is her own writing that rejects formulaic interpretations of the Piedmontese desire for unification of cultures. Nothing, in fact, can be further from the life of the *riione* than the parables of good children narrated in *Cuore*. Also, Elena's ambivalence toward Maestra Oliviero lies at the core of the construction of her character, which constantly oscillates between the mobility that school can offer and the constraints of the *riione*.

Part II, "All That's Left in the Margins?: Ferrante's Poetics," contains three essays. The first, "Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*: In Search of Parthenope and the 'Founding' of a New City" by Franco Gallippi, discusses how the first three novels of the quartet capture the "essence of the city of Naples" and recuperates Matilde Serao's corporeal writing of the city. The myth of Parthenope also generates several reflections on how Elena and Lila reread the classics (Virgil especially being an author Ferrante frequents quite often in her novels), and how the reprisal of figures like abandoned Dido tend to center the writing of novels as an ongoing discussion around the question of love (103) and the "essence of literature" (106). Enrica Maria Ferrara's "Performative Realism and Post-Humanism in *The Days of Abandonment*" discusses Ferrante's approach to realism in her 2002 novel. Ferrara analyzes Olga's relation to her dog, Otto, during a summer in which the woman comes—quite literally—undone. Ferrara sees it as a way to deconstruct and problematize conventional use of realism to favor, instead, performative realism. Stiliana Milkova ties three novels together: *Troubling Love*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *Story of a New Name* in her study on ekphrasis entitled "Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics: Ekphrasis in *Troubling Love*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Story of a New Name*". Milkova discusses ekphrasis in terms of a "strategic employment of visual images" to demonstrate how "Delia, Amalia, and Lila are robbed of agency, consumed literally and figuratively by a patriarchal society, their bodies violated physically or objectified by way of painting and photography" (160).

Part III is mostly devoted to the analysis of the maternal and re-figurations of maternity in the Neapolitan novels. It opens with a beautiful essay by Tiziana de Rogatis on Greek mythology and Initiation Rites in *Troubling Love*, "Metamorphosis and Rebirth: Greek Mythology and Initiation Rites in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*," originally published in Italian with the title "L'amore molesto di Elena Ferrante. Mito classico, riti di iniziazione e identità femminile" (*Allegoria* 69-70, 2014, 273-308). De Rogatis begins her essay by talking about the myth of Kore and Persephone and how Ferrante reworks it in her first novel through a fairy tale-esque mode in which *Alice in Wonderland*'s and Freud's influences interlace in the composition of a problematic reading of Delia's relationship with the mother and her traumatic childhood sexual abuse. Through several (four) metamorphoses, Delia finally performs a modification of her relationship to her mother. Not the undressing, but the clothing as the act of cutting and reconstructing clothes, represents an interesting key to understanding of what *mat(t)er* Delia, post-Amalia's death, is made of. Both de Rogatis and Christine Maksimowicz, author of the second essay in the third part, "Maternal Failure and Its Bequest: Toxic Attachment in the Neapolitan Novels," draw interesting reflections from Ferrante's review of Alice Sebold's *The Almost Moon* regarding the daughter's matricidal desire which, in Sebold's novel, is actually fulfilled. De Rogatis applies psychoanalytic theory and myth to operate an original and thought-provoking reading of *L'amore molesto*, while Maksimowicz discusses it as a key to understanding ambivalent maternal love in the Neapolitan novels (209) and proposes that the absence of intimacy hinders "the development of a subjectivity capable of relationality and autonomy" (211). Each attempt is filled with shame, perhaps one of the most common emotions in Ferrante's narrative. Shame, guilt, and embarrassment are usually held to underlie norm compliance. Such punitive emotions are, in fact, literally exploited by Ferrante for the construction of her characters. Finally, Leslie Elwell discusses the maternal by also taking into consideration previous works on the subject in her "Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*." By discussing the important contribution of Adalgisa

Giorgio, Laura Benedetti, and Patrizia Sambuco and the role of Italian feminist thought in the analysis of mother-daughter relations, Elwell delves into the discussion of the maternal in *La figlia oscura*. Elwell notes how such relations are usually delivered through the agonizing and consuming narration of the daughter about the mother's role in her life. Recently, we have witnessed the flourishing of works on the daughter's relation with the mother more in terms of matrophobia than in those of mother-quest narratives. This is, Elwell notes, a recent move in which "female development depends upon a renewed relationship to the mother's authority" (244). Nicoletta Mandolini's "Telling the Abuse: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Reading of Gender Violence, Repressed Memory, and Female Subjectivity in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*" rereads this novel against the theoretical background of Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*, while Emma Van Ness's insightful "*Dixit Mater*: The Significance of the Maternal Voice in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels" draws from Kristeva and de Beauvoir's reflections on the maternal. From the reading of the sea (oceanic space) through all of Ferrante's novels to her analysis of the first scene in *My Brilliant Friend* in which the use of the doll serves as Elena and Lila's re-enactment of the Freudian *fort da* as a means to overcome their relationship with the mother and the patriarchal order, Van Ness's study is perhaps one of the best additions to Ferrante's criticism to this date. The volume ends with an interview of the English translator of Ferrante, Ann Goldstein. Goldstein's reflections on the author's true identity are compelling:

To me Ferrante's "true identity" is the person who is writing the books, who is very present, very vivid, even if she is not, of course, the same as the "I" who is narrating the stories. I don't want to say that any way of reading Ferrante is not valid, but at the same time I think that focusing on her identity is a *distracting concern*. She has said that the books are themselves: she has written them and has done her part. I have a strong sense of the person who is writing, and I don't feel a need to know her any better than I do. (318, emphasis added)

The question of Ferrante's true identity is something that, while unworthy of interest at the time of publication of her first three novels, has now become an obsessive quest. I thus partly understand Goldstein's relative lack of concern with respect to this issue, to the point of defining it a "distracting concern." I cannot, however, share her fatalism and discard the issue of the author's true identity. Ferrante has been masterfully manipulating this issue for two decades. By not making known who she really is, Ferrante has been able to release answers for herself that are constructed and "fictional" just as much as her narratives (and like *La frantumaglia*). Also, while I am intrigued by many statements in the volume, I consider the analysis of the mother-daughter relation and, by default, a woman's relation to another woman, to be hardly a puzzling topic at this temporal conjuncture. The topics Ferrante traverses represent some of those most studied by feminist and postfeminist scholars (the maternal, violence against women, the patriarchal order, social mobility with respect to women, advancement in career at the cost of one's own private life, family relations). So, while one realizes that this book is largely an instructional volume for Anglophone readers who want to acquaint themselves with Ferrante's work, we need to reflect on some issues that emerge from its reading. First, *Ferrante fever*, or the actual phenomenon that has turned Ferrante into a worldwide literary phenomenon only with the quartet and only after more than twenty years after *L'amore molesto*: why is this quartet so telling to so many people? Second, Ferrante and Italian literature: what is her role within our literature? What changes can we draw from her writing? Lastly, the question of Ferrante and her anonymity, one that is limited only to public appearances but not to her interviews. This is not Salinger's case and I think it deserves more attention. Also, in some cases, a more scientific approach to previous critical receptions of Ferrante's works could have avoided repetitions of statements already made, while a more extensive bibliographical grounding and further reading could have helped in other cases to fill the literary vacuum in which some of the essays seem to float (Gallippi's work on Serao and Ferrante does not suffice to define a Neapolitan line of writers). Close readings and myth analysis also do not suffice to explain the fascination with

Ferrante's novels. Just as they do not suffice to explain why the quartet charms millions of readers and what the recipe is for the rewriting of margins within the story of Elena and Lila, they do not suffice to insert Ferrante into a correct Italian literary taxonomy. The construction of her female characters and of the Neapolitan setting deserve an understanding that goes beyond textual analysis and situates them in the market phenomenon. In short, while great attention to the influence of the classics is paid in homage to the lines Ferrante so clearly gives in her studied answers in all her interviews (both Italian and American), not many authors in the book raise questions regarding the ways in which Ferrante directs her readers toward this kind of reading and not, for instance, toward her relationship with a long trajectory of Italian women writers who have addressed very similar topics. One feels as if not only Lila but we, too, have fallen prey to Elena's astute diktats.

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