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Mullenneaux, Lisa. *Naples' Little Women: The Fiction of Elena Ferrante*. New York, NY: Pennington Press, 2016. Pp. (PDF - 212, Amazon - 142, Kobo - 167). ISBN 9780970429643. \$18.99 (Kindle). \$19.99 (Kobo).

Twice in her recent study of Elena Ferrante's fiction, Lisa Mullenneaux uses the formulation "because this is a Ferrante novel." The first time, she qualifies the phrase by writing: "the answers lie in wounds that haven't healed" (62). The remark appears again, some thirty pages later, this time coupled with "we know the shadow of the past is never far away" (95). To discerning readers of Ferrante, both statements will undoubtedly sound true, yet also insufficient. Surely, open wounds and a recurring past are staples of most, if not all, literature; surely, Ferrante must be doing something else, something quite new and of her own with these ancient themes if she is to deserve the critical acclaim that has been poured on her novels. It would, therefore, have benefited Mullenneaux's *Naples' Little Girls: The Fiction of Elena Ferrante* (2016) to outright ask the question: What makes a Ferrante novel? What is it about this reticent author that has captivated millions around the world, sparking a literary phenomenon which has managed to involve both the reading public at large and the more demanding academic world? Mullenneaux's study, for all its strengths, does little to advance the question. Instead, it provides a useful introduction for those seeking to explore some of the theoretical and historical currents behind Ferrante's novels.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first four are each dedicated to one novel (although Mullenneaux refers to Ferrante's "seven novels," the author herself has explicitly stated that she has only published four). Mullenneaux complements detailed plot summary with Ferrante's own thoughts on these novels (included in *La Frantumaglia*), the novels' reception, and, finally, a commentary of her own. The remaining four chapters situate Ferrante within broader traditions: first of French and Italian feminist thought since the seventies, then of the European *künstlerromane*, and, finally, of Neapolitan narratives. The only glaring omission comes in the form of Ferrante's strictly literary affinities; Chapter VII, on the *künstlerromane*, is the closest (albeit cursory) nod we get at some of these. Scholars of Ferrante, then, would do well to think not only of Ferrante's position vis-à-vis the sociohistorical situation of twentieth-century Italy, but also of her debt to Classical antiquity and, most importantly, to the European novel—to Morante, yes, but also to Austen, Flaubert, or Tolstoy.

This omission notwithstanding, Mullenneaux covers vast territory. Repeatedly, she lists works that might be in conversation with Ferrante's. Although the lack of a profound analysis of these connections results in a sense of cataloguing, *Naples' Little Girls* does present a basic index of authors and works useful to scholars who plan to study Ferrante, especially to those unfamiliar with the robust tradition of Italian women writers. Some of these writers, such as Elsa Morante and Alba de Céspedes, Ferrante herself has mentioned in interviews; others, like Matilde Serao or Sibilla Aleramo, have been identified by Mullenneaux and other scholars. At times, however, *Naples' Little Girls* falls into extensive summarizing that quickly becomes cumbersome and obstructive to those who have read the novels. Those who have not but, for some reason, find themselves reading Mullenneaux's book, run the risk of being occasionally misinformed. Take, for instance, Mullenneaux's assertion that *Troubling Love* (1992; English translation, 2006) is "a mystery the pace of which is like a downhill ride in a car with no brakes" (23). This description is not only more apt to describe a novel by Dan Brown, but it also ignores the marked difference between Ferrante's treatment of plot in her first three novels and in the Neapolitan Quartet. The plot of *Troubling Love* is, in reality, quite sluggish. It is subordinated to Delia's ruminations, a formal quality characteristic of Ferrante's early fiction. Mullenneaux's dismissal of Ferrante's third published novel, *The Lost Daughter* (2006, English translation, 2008), on the grounds that it contains no plot, and her assertion that "one of the novel's weaknesses is that much of the drama takes place in Leda's head" (64) is, quite plainly, alarming. It is equatable to a scholar of Woolf complaining that the speaker of *A Room of One's Own* is too self-involved.

Much of the drama in *any* of Ferrante's novels, particularly in the first three, takes place in the protagonist's head, or, at any rate, gains meaning there. This is the reason why Ferrante is not interested in breaking away from first-person narratives. She writes in *La Frantumaglia* (2016): "l'io narrante nelle mie storie non è mai una voce monologante, ma scrittura" (The writing "I" in my stories is never a voice giving a monologue; she is writing). Writing, therefore, is not just communicative, but serves as the main resource at the disposal of these women in order to make sense of their experiences, an attempt to weave into a narratable thread the heterogeneous mass of experience that underlies an ultimately meaningless existence. How, then, can the drama *not* take place in Leda's head?

Even in the *Quartet*, which relies more heavily on plot, action is still subordinated to Elena's own narrating mind. In this sense, Mullenneaux is right to bring Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives* into her discussion. Lila is, as Mullenneaux writes, Elena's necessary other. But while Elena and Lila's relationship takes center stage, the larger network of relationships that ties them to the *rione* is also essential. Two inconsistencies in Mullenneaux's book display a failure to discern this network: on page 85, Nella is described as "the girls' former teacher," when, in reality, she is the cousin of their former teacher; this discrepancy, however, pales in comparison to Mullenneaux's identification of *Little Women* (the book that lends its title to this study) as the prize that Lila receives from the local library for her voracious reading habits. In truth, Lila's family is awarded four books from the local library, one of which is *Bruges-la-Morte* (the other three remain unnamed). *Little Women*, instead, is the book that the two friends buy with the money Don Achille gives them as compensation for their lost dolls. This little fact is of monumental importance: *Little Women*, the book that started it all, the foundation of the girls' dreams, the reason why Elena became a writer and why, ostensibly, there is a *Quartet* in the first place, was acquired with the local Camorra chief's money. In other words, Don Achille, the *rione's* loan shark, is at the root of Elena's education—a stark commentary on Ferrante's part on the pervasiveness of corruption.

Despite its shortcomings, *Naples' Little Women* is an opportune publication. Scholarly interest in Ferrante outside of Italy has increased along with the author's popularity. Works like Mullenneaux's have the positive impact of highlighting fields of study that might remain unexplored by many non-Italianists; they might, too, bring fundamental works, like those of Elsa Morante, to a wider readership. Yet it is difficult not to see *Naples' Little Girls* as an effort to cover too much ground—to tackle the greatest possible number of topics pertinent to Ferrantean scholarship. This is certainly a laudable effort, but one that opts for a wide scope at the expense of specificity. The problem is, it is only through the specificity of Ferrante's prose that Mullenneaux can respond to the question: What makes a Ferrante novel?

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