



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Side by Side: Female Collaboration in Ferrante’s Fiction and Ferrante Studies

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

Author: Stiliana Milkova, Oberlin College

Publication date: February 2021

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Invited Perspectives”

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/7-female-collaboration-ferrante>

Author Bio: Stiliana Milkova is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Oberlin College (USA). Her scholarly publications include several articles on Russian and Bulgarian literature, numerous articles on Elena Ferrante, and the monograph *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*. She has translated from Italian works by Anita Raja, Antonio Tabucchi, and Alessandro Baricco, among others. She edits the online journal *Reading in Translation* and her public writing has appeared in *Nazione Indiana*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Asymptote*, and *Public Books*.

Abstract: This essay proposes that Elena Ferrante’s novels depict female friendship and collaboration as a literal and metaphorical positioning side by side that dislodges the androcentric, vertical hierarchies of intellectual labor, authorship, and (re)production. Further, it argues that the collaborative female practices in Ferrante’s fiction have engendered—or brought to light—collaborative female and feminist projects in Ferrante Studies and outside academia establishing a legacy of creative and authorial women. Thus a double creation of female genealogies is at work within Ferrante’s novels and in the critical field that studies them.

Keywords: female collaboration, female genealogies, female friendship, Elena Ferrante, Ferrante Studies, frantumaglia

Copyright Information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Side by Side: Female Collaboration in Ferrante's Fiction and Ferrante Studies

STILIANA MILKOVA

Collaborations and exchanges between women are crucial to the plots and narrative fabric of Elena Ferrante's novels. These interactions constitute sites of resistance to a violent patriarchal culture which curbs women's creative or intellectual power. Moreover, they propose and enact alternative models to the androcentric hierarchies of intellectual labor and (re)production. In her first book, *L'amore molesto / Troubling Love* (1992), a mother-and-daughter duo establishes a female artistic legacy founded not on biological kinship, but on their shared female gaze and creative talent. The intellectual bond between Elena and Lila in Ferrante's tetralogy *L'amica geniale / My Brilliant Friend* (2011-2014) interrogates the paradigm of male creative genius by positing the two brilliant friends as the collective writers of the novels themselves. Ferrante's most recent novel, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti / The Lying Life of Adults* (2019), explores inter- and intra-generational female relationships as crucial to identity formation and self-actualization.

Ferrante's fictional female friendships depict expressive forms and social practices that have engendered—or perhaps simply brought to light—numerous female scholarly and literary alliances both in the field of Ferrante Studies and outside academia. Ferrante Studies can be defined as the global engagement with Elena Ferrante's writing through the lens of different methodologies, disciplines, and interpretive frameworks. It is distinguished by its participants' sustained dialogue with the robust criticism on the subject in both English and Italian and their capacity to read and cite her novels in the original.¹ Many of the manifestations of Ferrante Studies today—publications, conferences, seminars, panels, and intellectual debates—have often involved collaborations and co-authorship between women. We find a blurring of boundaries between fictional collaborations and female intellectual exchanges underpinning the study of Ferrante's texts. This *smarginatura* of life and art has permeated the world of literary translation and publishing as well, whereby collaborations between women writers and women translators have opened discursive spaces for more feminine voices and perspectives.²

The effect of Ferrante's novels can be summed up by Luisa Muraro's definition of a female genealogy: "I am not referring to the feminism of rights and equality, but to the movement that has led us to choose to stay among women, to choose to act in accordance with the judgment of our fellow women, to accept the authority of women, and to seek the nourishment of female thought for our minds."³ Ferrante's novels present and incite productive examples of intellectual and creative co-labor by women. In this essay I dwell on the collaborations, friendships, and legacies between women enacted on the pages of Ferrante's texts and the ways in which Ferrante scholarship has engaged the idea of female friendship and female genealogies. I draw on my first-hand knowledge of the field as one of its active participants.⁴ But more importantly, this essay itself was born out of many

¹ A tentative timeline of Ferrante Studies consists of three periods: 1) *before* 2011—that is, *before* the publication of *L'amica geniale* when we see a small number of articles and dissertation and book chapters appear in Italian and English; 2) the period 2012-2014 when essays on Ferrante's earlier novels and on *L'amica geniale* begin appearing; and 3) *after* the success of the tetralogy beginning in 2015 with numerous articles, book chapters, and eventually monographs and edited volumes being published. The "Works Cited" section includes some of the key publications in each of these periods.

² I use "smarginatura" to denote the blurring of demarcation lines or the dissolving of fixed borders. In the Neapolitan Novels Lila suffers from *smarginatura* which Tiziana de Rogatis reads in relation to symbolic and physical gender violence. De Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave*.

³ Muraro, "Female Genealogies," 331.

⁴ My scholarly work on Elena Ferrante dates to 2011 when I gave a paper on her poetics of disgust at the AAIS conference in Pittsburgh, PA. Since then I have written seven scholarly articles on Ferrante (five published and two in press, not counting the present essay) and a monograph.

conversations and intellectual exchanges with other female Ferrante scholars whose diverse approaches and astute analyses have generated several productive collaborations.⁵

Side by Side: Female Collaborations in Ferrante's Fiction

In *The Lying Life of Adults* Ferrante employs a distinct metaphor to depict an act of implicit violence. Giovanna, the narrator who struggles with the corporeal transformations of adolescence, is harassed by an older high school student, Silvestro. Silvestro comments publicly on her body: “[he] said in the courtyard, in a loud voice: her ass isn’t bad, either, just put a pillow over her face and you’d have a great fuck.”⁶ Giovanna is distraught: “I didn’t sleep that night, I wept in humiliation and rage.”⁷ These forms of invisible oppression, of objectification and dehumanization, characterize much of the collective male discourse in the novel. The pillow metaphor enacts a symbolic erasure of woman’s identity—it suggests effacement and fragmentation as modes of containment and control. Effacement and fragmentation are explored at length in Ferrante’s earlier novels and in her volume of non-fictional writing, *La frantumaglia / Frantumaglia* (2015). But her female protagonists counteract these mechanisms of oppression by joining forces—directly or indirectly—to recast them into acts of co-creation, establishing an authorial or artistic legacy of their own. By adopting a pseudonymous female identity and therefore remaining faceless, Elena Ferrante herself at once resists the trap of contemporary image-obsessed patriarchal culture and thematizes the effacement or erasure of women’s identities by the likes of Silvestro.

Ferrante’s first three novels—*L’amore molesto / Troubling Love* (1992), *I giorni dell’abbandono / The Days of Abandonment* (2002), and *La figlia oscura / The Lost Daughter* (2006)—center around fraught mother-daughter relationships where biological kinship is complicated by the presence of symbolic, or elective, mothers and daughters. The protagonists of these novels collapse physically and psychologically, rent by the psychical phenomenon Ferrante calls *frantumaglia*, the subject’s experience of shattering, of unbearable anguish, of porousness and fragility. The condition of *frantumaglia* is the effect of the systemic violence inflicted on them by fathers, brothers, and husbands.⁸ *Frantumaglia* is, in other words, the internalization of corporeal fragmentation—of battered and bleeding body parts—synonymous with the ontology of Ferrante’s feminine subjects. *Frantumaglia* is also the internalization of their effaced identities, their reduction to “merchandise to barter,” to objects such as the disfigured dolls in *The Lost Daughter* or the shoes Lila designs in *My Brilliant Friend*.⁹

During the process of psychical or physical breakdown Ferrante’s female protagonists turn to their mothers or daughters, real or desired, to locate means of resistance outside the symbolic order. The mother’s story in *Troubling Love* is narrated by the daughter who, after her mother’s death, gradually assembles the fragments of her repressed memories to reconstruct her own and her mother’s history of abuse and molestation. Likewise, Delia, the daughter, collects the traces her mother, Amalia, has left for her to compose a new portrait of a woman whose husband had painted her as a semi-nude gypsy and sold on the market numerous copies of the painting. The daughter’s new portrait of Amalia entails the creative techniques she has inherited from her seamstress mother—cutting and sewing,

⁵ I am referring to my collaborators and intellectual partners Tiziana de Rogatis, Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, Enrica Ferrara, Olivia Santovetti, and Serena Todesco.

⁶ Ferrante, *The Lying Life of Adults*. iBooks, chapter 11; Ferrante, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, 208.

⁷ Ferrante, *The Lying Life of Adults*. iBooks, chapter 11; Ferrante, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, 208.

⁸ On the violated female body in Ferrante’s novels, see Wehling-Giorgi, “Writing Liminality” and “Playing with the Maternal Body”; and de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave*. On Ferrante’s theory of *frantumaglia* see *Frantumaglia*, 98-169.

⁹ Ferrante, *The Story of the New Name*, 112.

altering and creating anew. The daughter then inaugurates a posthumous artistic connection with her mother, a connection which abolishes the paternal and patriarchal legacy.

The bond between Amalia and Delia is manifested at the end of the novel as a double creative act, a collaboration and an alliance between women. After adjusting her mother's much-altered blue suit to fit her body, Delia puts it on. She then alters the photograph on her ID card to transform her face into Amalia's, repeating a process her mother had performed on her own photo ID to make it look like Delia. Their shared artistic creation, their shared female gaze, reverses their erasure and fragmentation within the symbolic and destabilizes the entrenched androcentric and patrilinear production of art. The novel then constitutes the double portrait and double narrative of Amalia-Delia placed symbolically side by side. Their alliance restores autonomy to Amalia and Delia as the agents of their own visual and narrative representation. Ferrante reclaims the mother-daughter bond as creative and productive rather than merely reproductive labor.¹⁰ This bond initiates the various forms of feminine collaboration—and narration—in Ferrante's subsequent novels.

A female authorial-creative collaboration lies at the heart of the four Neapolitan Novels. This idea is introduced in the narrative frame as a competition of sorts. Elena, the first-person narrator is an established writer who learns that her friend Lila has vanished at the age of 66. Elena sets out to write down Lila's life, to narrate their 60 years of tug-of-war friendship and thus conjure her back into life. "We'll see who wins this time," she proclaims. "I turned on the computer and began to write."¹¹ At stake for Elena as a writer is summoning, through the power of her narrative art, Lila's presence—her voice, words, visage. In fact, Lila has cut herself out of all photographs, not leaving a single trace of her corporeal existence. This gesture of unframing herself through self-erasure is the culmination of what we find out was Lila's ongoing project of self-destruction. Lila's disappearance generates Elena's desire to narrate her friend's existence. Both friends then are the co-authors and protagonists of the text. Lila stands, as it were, beside Elena, egging her on to write the story of their friendship. As the editors of this issue of *gender/sexuality/italy* remind us, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conceives of co-labor as occupying a polyvalent space "beside" another, furnishing a site of resistance to vertical hierarchies and distribution of power:

the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos. ... *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.¹²

Lila becomes Elena's co-author from the very beginning of the tetralogy, her voice filtered through her friend's writing and her absence the necessary condition for her textual/narrative presence.¹³ Their friendship dislodges the vertical patriarchal structures of power and creative genius, and instead entails the gamut of relations Kosofsky Sedgwick describes.

Lila is literally Elena's co-author, as Elena's own writing is indebted to her friend's words. Since childhood they have practiced a mutual emulation or mirroring—a specular relationship whose

¹⁰ Wehling-Giorgi has argued that the very language mother and daughter share—the Neapolitan dialect—is reworked from a locus of violence into a tool for the daughter's self-actualization through the mother tongue. Wehling-Giorgi, "Ero separata da me," 222-227

¹¹ Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, 23.

¹² Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 8. Italics in the original.

¹³ Stefania Lucamante proposes a different reading of Elena's narrative power as the result of her cannibalization of Lila's talent. A woman's autonomy becomes possible at the expense of sisterhood and therefore undoes feminism. Lucamante, "Undoing Feminism."

terms are established at the opening of the tetralogy, through their reciprocal gesture of throwing each other's doll in a dark basement. This gesture occasions a series of events which lead to the two girls buying and reading, sitting next to each other, Louisa Alcott's novel *Little Women*. This physical collocation of their bodies side by side generates a life-long collaboration. When Elena becomes a writer, she realizes that her literary imagination has been shaped and suffused by her friend's words—the book Lila wrote as a child, her letters, the notebooks she entrusts to Elena. Lila is Elena's desired interlocutor and collaborator and she often imagines that she needs her friend's genius for her own insights and successes. When Elena sees the Bay of Naples for the first time, she envisions a double feminine creative talent that can capture its beauty.¹⁴ When Elena is writing her second book, she does not seek the intellectual input of her academic husband, but expresses a fantasy of female collaboration, side by side, as an antidote to the male creative tradition: "We would have written together, we would have been authors together, we would have drawn power from each other, we would have fought shoulder to shoulder because what was ours was inimitably ours."¹⁵

The narration of the Neapolitan Novels is the outcome of this imagined intellectual collaboration between Lila and Elena, their mutual narration of the self by way of narrating the other. In *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante confirms the idea of Lila's and Elena's mutual (self)-creation: "I love the way in which Elena tells her story and the way in which Lila tells her own story through her friend."¹⁶ Elena's writing is a mode of defining herself through telling Lila's story, the articulation of a relational female identity that relies on the other to narrate the self.¹⁷ The fiction of individual authorship is eschewed within the diegetic world of the Neapolitan Novels—and even genius is shared between Lila and Elena since each perceives the other as her "genius friend."¹⁸

Ferrante's most recent novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, revisits the trope of female friendship as the foundation of narrative and storytelling. But it also offers models for non-normative and non-traditional relations between women. Giovanna, the first-person narrator, recounts her adolescence but at the same time her text supplies another possible female author/narrator thereby thematizing again the narration of the self by the other. Giovanna's intimate friendship with two sisters, Ida and Angela, the well-educated daughters of wealthy family friends, provides the structural counterpart to several other friendships she cultivates in the poor, low-class neighborhood of her father's relatives. Despite her family's disapproval, she forms a close relationship with her uncouth, semi-illiterate aunt Vittoria who occupies the role of her symbolic mother. Their friendship catalyzes many of the plot twists in the novel, but most importantly, it shapes Giovanna's self-perception, her behavior and even her language. "We are identical," she says of herself and her aunt.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, 138. Here it is important to note that Enrica Ferrara reads Elena and Lila's narration through the lens of posthumanist theory as constituting a plural subject, so that in their plurality they are able to narrate the world. See Ferrara 2017, 2020, 2021. Tiziana de Rogatis defines Elena's narration as "narrazione polifonica, duale, grazie alla quale la voce narrante di Elena si sdoppia in quella dell'amica" (*Parole Chiave*, 41). And Olivia Santovetti argues for the dialectic of novel and anti-novel represented by the creative duo Elena-Lila ("The Theme of Erasure and the *Smarginatura* as Poetics of Resistance").

¹⁵ Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 354.

¹⁶ *Frantumaglia*, 360.

¹⁷ On self-narration, see Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*; Cavarero, "Storytelling Philosophy and Self Writing," 239; Ghezzeo and Teardo, "On Lila's Traces," 183.

¹⁸ This mutually attributed and shared genius is not unproblematic, however. Lila and Elena's friendship is competitive, often rent by resentment, jealousy, and petty meanness. Elena's narration is compromised by her envy of her friend's writing style. Inge van de Ven reads Lila as trapped within Elena's ambition to produce a monumental masculine book (*Big Books in the Times of Big Data*, 132-134), whereas Isabella Pinto reads Elena's act of narration as a (mis)translation and a colonization of her friend's life and speech ("Discorso indiretto libero," 49-66).

¹⁹ Ferrante, *The Lying Life of Adults* epub. *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, 86.

At the end of the novel Giovanna rejects Vittoria's legacy and inaugurates her own by siding with her friend Ida, a precocious and prolific writer. Ida reads to Giovanna one of her stories—a narrative about two sisters and their girlfriend that mirrors the novel we have been reading. Ida emerges as a possible co-narrator and co-author, sitting literally *beside* Giovanna on a park bench. Their positioning side by side, literally and metaphorically, emerges as Giovanna too uses the pen to assert her identity. She counteracts Silvestro's violence in an ingenious way. On her way out of class she stabs his arm with her pencil. The pencil penetrates his skin and the tip remains inside. Giovanna wields the pen/phallus thereby metaphorically writing over the fragmentation and objectification of her body, asserting her authorial potential and undoing Silvestro's effacement of her identity. In this way she also establishes a lineage—a female genealogy of sorts—with her writer friend and possible co-narrator Ida. This narrative framing of Ida as the narrator of Giovanna's life and conversely, of Giovanna as the narrator of Ida's, constitutes another example of narrating the self through the other. Ferrante questions the reliability of monologic narration and instead offers a dialogic, multisided storytelling that opens room for different feminine voices and subjectivities. Or, as Adriana Cavarero exclaims, "What a felicitously expressive outcome of the shattering or fragmentation Ferrante calls *frantumaglia!*"²⁰

Ferrante Studies & The Ferrante Effect

The pronounced emphasis of Ferrante's novels on the formation of feminine identity in an oppressive and abusive patriarchal culture has elicited scholarly approaches grounded in Italian, French, or Anglophone feminist thought. Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Carla Lonzi, Adriana Cavarero, Luisa Muraro, Teresa de Lauretis, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler are some of the most widely cited thinkers in relation to Ferrante's novels.²¹ Ferrante herself has identified many of her theoretical influences, including most of these thinkers, thus authorizing the analytical apparatus for interpreting her narratives. She has indicated, however, that she often mixes and matches different theories, refusing to subscribe to a single ideology.²² This strategic licensing of inter- and multi-disciplinarity aligns with Ferrante's eschewal of single-perspective narration and her depiction of shared, collaborative authorship in her novels.

It is important to note that many scholars have homed in on theories and social-symbolic practices of exchanges between women to analyze Ferrante's representations of women's intellectual or creative work.²³ The concept and practice of *affidamento*—a relationship of entrustment or mentorship between women, proposed by theorists of sexual difference such as Luisa Muraro and the Milan's Women's Bookstore Collective, have become germane instruments for analyzing Ferrante's novels.²⁴ Scholars have read Lila and Elena's friendship as well as the relationships between symbolic mothers and daughters in Ferrante's first three short novels as various forms of entrustment. These

²⁰ Cavarero, "Storytelling Philosophy," 247.

²¹ These include but are not limited to Katrin Wehling-Giorgi (2016, 2017, 2019), Leslie Elwell (2016), Emma van Ness (2016), Nicoletta Mandolini (2016), Tiziana de Rogatis (2018, 2019), Serena Todesco (2019), Ghezzi and Teardo (2019), Olivia Santovetti (2019), Emanuela Caffè (2019), Isabella Pinto (2020).

²² "[S]ommo insieme anche posizioni distanti." Ferrante, *La frantumaglia*, 323.

²³ There are many other valid and insightful approaches as well, but for the purposes of this essay I focus on readings of the collaboration, mentorship, or alliance between women in Ferrante's novels.

²⁴ See, for example, Milkova, "Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy" and "The Translator's Visibility"; Elwell, "Breaking Bonds"; Falkoff, "To Translate is to Betray"; Ricciardi, "Can the Subaltern Speak in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?"; Lucamante, "For Sista Only?"; de Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave*; Sotgiu, "Elena Ferrante e il femminismo della differenza"; Caffè, "Staging a Word."

novels enact variations of *affidamento* by staging scenarios in which the female protagonists look to another woman for guidance or scenes in which the other woman becomes the mirror of the self. The relational character of the self theorized by Adriana Cavarero has been used to shed light on Elena's self narration by way of telling her friend's story.²⁵ Relationality and *affidamento* provide useful tools for gaining insights into Ferrante's construction of a female symbolic comprised of various forms of collaboration and exchanges between women.

Another idea emerging from feminist thought is that of female genealogy. Luisa Muraro's already quoted definition, which comes from her own intellectual engagement with Irigaray, can be applied to both Ferrante's fictional female alliances and to the ones she envisions for her fellow women writers and artists.²⁶ In her non-fictional writing Ferrante has commented on the need for women to establish their own creative traditions and legacies.²⁷ Ferrante scholarship has at once anticipated and responded to this call by contextualizing Ferrante's works within a larger, international tradition of women's writing and espousing a comparative methodology which combines theoretical frameworks and literary texts authored by women.²⁸ Even if Ferrante does not acknowledge some of her literary mothers or "the vast patrimony of women-authored novels," as Lucamante argues, she nonetheless problematizes the male tradition unambiguously captured by the word "patrimony."²⁹ As Ferrante puts it: "We, all of us women, need to build a genealogy of our own, one that will embolden us, define us, allow us to see ourselves outside the tradition through which men have viewed, represented, evaluated, and catalogued us."³⁰

The formation of a scholarly female genealogy—an active network of collaborative projects undertaken by women, by young scholars and established academics alike who engage actively with Ferrante's novels and sustain a meaningful dialogue with Ferrante criticism—is also at work in Ferrante Studies. The robust, burgeoning field of Ferrante Studies has created a sense of bonding and solidarity among women scholars, constructing a shared community for discussing female subjectivity, identity, and authorship through a range of disciplinary perspectives and methodologies. Besides many valuable contributions by individual scholars, numerous women co-organizers, co-presenters, co-editors, co-authors, and co-translators, and other manifestations of co-labor have characterized Ferrante scholarship.³¹ And significantly, we see a surge in collective feminist practices influenced by those modelled in Ferrante's texts.³²

²⁵ Ghezzeo and Teardo argue that Lila and Elena's relational interdependence structures the narrative framework of the text itself. "On Lila's Traces," 187.

²⁶ Muraro, "Female Genealogies"

²⁷ Ferrante calls explicitly for a female literary and artistic tradition in *Frantumaglia*, 343, 361, 363; in *Incidental Inventions*, 86; and in an editorial in the *New York Times* titled "A Power of Our Own."

²⁸ Comparative readings have focused on Elena Ferrante and women writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Simone de Beauvoir, Christa Wolf, Slavenka Drakulić, Alice Sebold, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sibilla Aleramo, Elsa Morante, Anna Maria Ortese, Natalia Ginzburg, Vanessa Ambrosecchio, Cristina Comencini, and Milena Agus. *Dell'ambivalenza*, the 2016 volume co-edited by Anna Maria Crispino and Marina Vitale addresses the dynamics of narration in Ferrante, Julie Otsuka, and Goliarda Sapienza.

²⁹ Lucamante, "Undoing Feminism," 3.

³⁰ Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 361.

³¹ Some examples of such practices include the 2017 conference in Naples co-organized by Mariella Muscariello and Tiziana de Rogatis; the volume *The Works of Elena Ferrante* co-edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love; Flora Ghezzeo and Sara Teardo's co-authored article "On Lila's Traces" emerging from their co-presentation at the 2015 AAIS conference; the 2019 Durham University conference *Elena Ferrante in a Global Context* co-organized by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, Tiziana de Rogatis, and me, and the special issue of *MLN* co-edited by de Rogatis, Wehling-Giorgi and me.

³² Recently, Sarah Chihaya, Merve Emre, Katherine Huill, and Jill Richards have co-authored a volume of collective autobiographical writing intermixed with essays, *The Ferrante Letters. An Experiment in Collective Criticism* (2020). This book is the result of a joint blogging project they define as "reading and writing about women reading and writing" which appeared online in 2015 in the journal *Post45* as "The Slow Burn." This volume does not engage with any Ferrante

For instance, Nancy K. Miller's superb group biography *My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism* (2019) narrates her productive professional and personal relationships with three prominent feminist intellectuals—Carolyn Heilbrun, Diane Middlebrook, and Naomi Schor. Not only is the book a *tour de force* account of female friendship, but the title purposefully references Ferrante's novel and draws on the literary model of female friendship proposed by the tetralogy as a form of feminine and feminist collaborative exchange. As translator and writer Jenny McPhee suggests, Miller sees in her relationship with Schor parallels to Ferrante's fictional friends Lila and Lenù, while the writing of Miller and her friends forges a bond and legacy among women.³³ McPhee sees this profound exploration of female friendship with all its complexities and contradictions as an extraordinary contribution to a much impoverished genre.³⁴ Further, the plural form of the title—*My Brilliant Friends*—indicates the expansion of female genius beyond the dual model offered by Lila and Elena and the articulation of its multiple configurations.

To take a step further, I want to suggest that the friendships, alliances, and collaborations narrated in Elena Ferrante's novels are mirrored in the reality of readers, publishers, translators, and public intellectuals. Her fictional characters spill out into real life so that every reader has “tumbled from Ferrante's pages” onto a formative, all-consuming childhood friendship of their own.³⁵ And “My Brilliant Friend” has become a frequently used phrase, with the adjective “brilliant” applied intentionally as a reference to the two genius female friends whose life-long friendship constitutes the plot of the tetralogy. The concept of female genius as mutually constitutive, collaborative, and shared between the equally prodigious Lila and Elena has gained visibility.

The beneficial effects of the Ferrante phenomenon are evidenced by the number of translations of women writers and in the publication of more writing by women. Anna Momigliano has defined “the Ferrante effect” as the “rediscovery of some of the last century's great Italian female writers” which “has encouraged a new wave of women and shaken [Italy's] literary establishment. Women writers here are winning prestigious prizes, getting translated and selling copies.”³⁶ Furthermore, the practice of women translating women—Ann Goldstein translating Elena Ferrante and Elsa Morante, Jenny McPhee and Ann Goldstein translating Anna Maria Ortese, the revival of Natalia Ginzburg translated by Minna Proctor and by Jenny McPhee—has become a feminist project. Recently Madeleine Watts has argued that “there is a communal feminist project at work here, one in which women have amplified and enabled the broader dispersion of other women's voices.”³⁷ This feminist project has not only augmented the visibility of women translators in a male-dominated professional field, it has also augmented the visibility of women authors in a male-dominated literary canon. The Ferrante phenomenon has created a community of women translators, as Antonietta Sanna remarked at a round table at the University of Pisa celebrating Ferrante's many translators around the world.³⁸ Even critiques of Ferrante's feminist project create possibilities for multiple voices and perspectives, akin to what she accomplishes through the notion of collaborative female authorship in her novels. Or as Tiziana de Rogatis reminds us, the Neapolitan Novels at once create and reflect a global feminist storytelling.³⁹

scholarship in English or Italian, nor does it approach the Neapolitan Novels in the original, for the authors admit, they are not scholars of Italian literature.

³³ McPhee, “Sometimes Women Do Like Women”; Nancy K. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 87, 137, 140.

³⁴ McPhee, “Sometimes Women Do Like Women”

³⁵ Purdy, “Maybe Connect”; Biggs, “I was blind, she a falcon.”

³⁶ Momigliano, “The Ferrante Effect”

³⁷ Watts, “The Translation of Women by Women is a Feminist Project”

³⁸ Sanna, concluding remarks, 26 September 2019.

³⁹ De Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante's Key Words*, 289-290.

Works Cited

- Alfano, Barbara. "The Fact of the Matter: Ethics and Materiality in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." *Italian Quarterly* 203-206 (Winter to Fall 2015): 24-41.
- Alsop, Elizabeth. "Femmes Fatales: 'La Fascinazione di Morte' in Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* and *I giorni dell'abbandono*." *Italica* 91, no. 3 (2014): 466-485.
- Benedetti, Laura. "Il linguaggio dell'amicizia e della città. *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante tra continuità e cambiamento." *Quaderni d'italianistica* XXXIII (2012): 171-187.
- . *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-century Italy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.
- Biggs, Joanna. "I was blind, she a falcon." *London Review of Books*, September 10, 2015. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n17/joanna-biggs/i-was-blind-she-a-falcon>.
- Bovo Romoeuf, Martine. "Riscritture del romanzo d'amore: 'l'impossibile amoroso del reale' nei romanzi di Elena Ferrante e Milena Agus." *Narrativa* 30 (2008): 179-194.
- Buonanno, Elda. "*La Frantumaglia*: Elena Ferrante's 'Fragmented Self'." PhD diss., City University of New York, 2008.
- Caffè, Emanuela. "Staging a Word. Overcoming and Recovering Familial Bonds in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." *Carte Italiane* 12, no. 1 (2019): 105-124.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul Kottman. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- . "Storytelling Philosophy and Self Writing: Preliminary Notes on Elena Ferrante. Interview with Adriana Cavarero." Translated by Stiliana Milkova and Isabella Pinto. *Narrative* 28, no. 2 (2020): 236-249.
- Chihaya, Sarah, Merve Emre, Katherine Hill and Jill Richards. *The Ferrante Letters. An Experiment in Collective Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
- Crispino, Anna Maria and Marina Vitale. *Dell'ambivalenza. Dinamiche della narrazione in Elena Ferrante, Julie Otsuka e Goliarda Sapienza*. Pavona: Iacobelli Editore, 2016.
- De Rogatis, Tiziana, *Elena Ferrante's Key Words*. Translated by Will Schutt. New York: Europa Editions, 2019.
- . *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave*. Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018.
- . "Elena Ferrante e il Made in Italy. La costruzione di un immaginario femminile e napoletano." In *Made in Italy e cultura*, edited by Daniele Balicco, 288–317. Palermo: Palumbo, 2016.
- . "*L'amore molesto* di Elena Ferrante. Mito classico, riti di iniziazione e identità femminile." *Allegoria* 69-70 (2014): 273-308.
- . "Metamorfosi del tempo. Il ciclo de *L'amica geniale*." *Allegoria* 73 (2016): 123-137.
- . "Metamorphosis and Rebirth: Greek Initiation Rites in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*." In *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love, 185-206. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016.
- Elwell, Leslie. "Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*." In *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love, 237-69. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016.
- . *Italian Female Epistemologies beyond 'The Scene of the Crime.'* Ph.D. Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, 2013.
- Falkoff, Rebecca. "To Translate is to Betray." *Public Books*. March 25, 2015. <https://www.publicbooks.org/to-translate-is-to-betray-on-the-elena-ferrante-phenomenon-in-italy-and-the-us/>.

- Ferrante, Elena. *Frantumaglia. A Writer's Journey*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2016.
- . *Incidental Inventions*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2019.
- . *La frantumaglia. Edizione ampliata*. Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2015.
- . *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*. Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2019.
- . *The Lying Life of Adults*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2020. iBooks.
- . *My Brilliant Friend*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2012.
- . *The Story of the Lost Child*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2015.
- . *The Story of the New Name*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2013.
- . *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions, 2014.
- Ferrara, Enrica. "Elena Ferrante e la questione dell'identità." *Oblio* 26–27 (2017): 47-55.
- . "Posthumanism and Identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." In *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film: Boundaries and Identity*, edited by Enrica Maria Ferrara. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- . "The Precarious Life of Women and the Right to Disappear: Grief and Posthuman Identity in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." Forthcoming in *MLN* 136:1 (2021).
- Gambaro, Elisa. "Il fascino del regresso. Note su *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante." *Enthymema* XI (2014): 168-177.
- Ghezzo, Flora and Sara Teardo. "On Lila's Traces: *Bildung*, Narration, and Ethics in *L'amica geniale*. *MLN* 134 (2019): 172-192.
- Giorgio, Adalgisa. "The Passion for the Mother: Conflicts and Idealizations in Contemporary Italian Narrative." In *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, edited by Adalgisa Giorgio, 119-154. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002.
- Karagoz, Claudia. *Amori molesti: The Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary Italian Women's Writing*. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001.
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Lombardi, Giancarlo. "Scambi d'identità: Il recupero del corpo Materno ne *L'amore molesto*." *Romance Languages Annual* 10 (1999): 288-291.
- Lucamante, Stefania. *A Multitude of Women: The Challenges of the Contemporary Italian Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- . "For Sista Only? Smarginare l'eredità delle sorelle Morante e Ramondino, ovvero i limiti e la forza del post-femminismo di Elena Ferrante." In *Sorelle e sorellanza nella letteratura e nelle arti*, edited by Claudia Cao and Marina Guglielmi, 315-334. Florence: Franco Cesati editore, 2018.
- . "Undoing Feminism. The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante." *Italica* 95:1 (2018): 1-19.
- Mandolini, Nicoletta. "Telling the Abuse: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Reading of Gender Violence, Repressed Memory, and Female Subjectivity in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*. In *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love, 271-292. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016.
- Marchais, Nathalie. "Madre o Donna? Figure femminili in conflitto nei romanzi di Elena Ferrante." *Ecritures* 2 (2006): 45-57.
- McPhee, Jenny. "Sometimes Women Do Like Women: On Nancy K. Miller's *My Brilliant Friends*." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. September 11, 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/sometimes-women-do-like-women-on-nancy-k-millers-my-brilliant-friends/>
- Milkova, Stiliana. "Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy in Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto*." *California Italian Studies* 6:1 (2016): 1-15.

- . “Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante’s *La figlia oscura*.” *Italian Culture* 31:2 (2013): 91-109.
- . “The Translator’s Visibility or the Ferrante – Goldstein Phenomenon.” *Allegoria* 73 (2016): 166-173.
- Miller, Nancy K. *My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Momigliano, Anna. “The Ferrante Effect: In Italy Women Writers are Ascendant.” *The New York Times*. 9 December 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/books/elena-ferrante-italy-women-writers.html>
- Muraro, Luisa. “Female Genealogies.” In *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, edited by Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, 317-334. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Paoli, Federica. “Dell'accettazione e del rifiuto: immagini e figure del materno da Elena Ferrante a Vanessa Ambrosecchio.” *Bollettino di Italianistica* 2 (2005): 159-172.
- Pinto, Isabella. “Discorso indiretto libero e soggettiva libera indiretta: leggere Elena Ferrante attraverso Pier Paolo Pasolini. Prime note sulla narratrice traduttrice.” *L'Ospite Ingrato. Rivista online del Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca Franco Fortini*. 7 (2020): 49-66.
- . *Elena Ferrante. Poetiche e politiche della soggettività*. Milan and Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2020.
- Purdy, Jedediah. “Maybe Connect.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. October 4, 2015. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/maybe-connect>
- Ricciardi, Alessia. “Can the Subaltern Speak in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels?” *Estetica: studi e ricerche* 7, no. 2 (2017): 293-312.
- Sambuco, Patrizia. “Construction and Self-Construction in Elena Ferrante’s Gendered Space.” In *Beyond the Piazza: Public and Private Spaces in Modern Italian Culture*, edited by Simona Storchi, 115-127. Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013.
- Sanna, Antonietta. Concluding remarks at the round table “Traduttori visibili di un’autrice invisibile.” Università di Pisa. September 26, 2019. <http://gel.fileli.unipi.it/>.
- Sotgiu, Elisa. “Elena Ferrante e il femminismo della differenza. Una lettura de *L'amica geniale*.” *Allegoria* 76 (2017): 58-76.
- Santovetti, Olivia. “*Io non ci sto*: Elena Ferrante, the Theme of Erasure, and the *Smarginatura* as Poetics of Resistance.” In *Resistance in Italian Culture from Dante to the 21st Century*, edited by Ambra Moroncini, Darrow Schecter, and Fabio Vighi, 281-294. Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2019.
- . “Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels.” *The Modern Language Review* 113, no. 3 (July 2018): 527-545.
- Todesco, Serena. “Città come corpo, madre, mondo: soggettività e abiezione dello spazio urbano al femminile in Elena Ferrante e Anna Maria Ortese.” In *Studi sull'immaginario italiano. Una prospettiva interdisciplinare*, edited by Eliana Moscarda Mirković, 75-87. Milan: Prospero Editore, 2019.
- . “Maternal Troubling Bodies in Slavenka Drakulić and Elena Ferrante.” Forthcoming in *MLN* 136:1 (2021).
- Van de Ven, Inge. *Big Books in the Times of Big Data*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019.
- Van Ness, Emma. “Dixit Mater: The Significance of the Maternal Voice in Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels.” In *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love, 293-312. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016.
- Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin. “Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels. Writing Liminality.” *Allegoria* 73 (2016): 204-210.

- . “‘Ero separata da me’: Memory, Selfhood and Mother-Tongue in Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante.” In *Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, edited by Alberica Bazzoni, Emma Bond, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 215-230. Fairleigh: Dickinson University Press, 2016. “Rethinking Constructs of Maternity in the Novels of Elena Ferrante and Alice Sebold,” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 30:1 (2019): 66-83.
- . “Playing with the Maternal Body: Violence, Desire, and Mutilation in Ferrante’s Novels.” *California Italian Studies* 7:1(2017).
- . “Unclaimed Stories: Narrating Sexual Violence and the Traumatized Self in Alice Sebold and Elena Ferrante's Works.” Forthcoming in *MLN* 136, no.1 (January 2021).
- Wood, James. “Women on the Verge. The fiction of Elena Ferrante.” *The New Yorker*. January 21, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/women-on-the-verge>
- Zanini Cordi, Irene. *Abandoned Women in Italian Literature*. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004.
- Watts, Madeleine. “The Translation of Women by Women is a Feminist Project.” *Center for the Art of Translation* blog. May 11, 2020. <https://www.catranslation.org/blog-post/the-translation-of-women-by-women-is-a-feminist-project/>