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Ferrante, Elena. *The Lying Life of Adults*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York, NY: Europa Editions, 2020. Pp. 324. ISBN 1609455916. \$15.60 (Hardback). \$16.35 (Paperback). \$ 9.99 (Kindle).

Elena Ferrante's Shameless WAP

With the groundbreaking single “WAP,” the two great rappers and songwriters Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion finally introduced America to the pussy.¹ Unrelatedly, but almost at the same time, Italian writer Elena Ferrante published the English translation of her latest novel, *The Lying Life of Adults* (2020). The latter is a coming of age story set in Ferrante’s beloved environment: the ambiguous, intricate city of Naples, where the author shows how her writing and her city entangle, inextricably, with ideas of narration, deception, maturity, and more importantly, female sexuality. A number of features put these two apparently distant artifacts in dialogue with each other: aside from the focus on female creativity and an uncompromising female gaze, a refreshingly hungry and aggressive tone pervades the two texts. But why would such a parallel be interesting? First, it is interesting for its reflection on language, in general, and on the language we use to talk about female sexuality in particular. Second, this parallel is interesting because *The Lying Life of Adults* lays bare an image of the pussy as a metaphor for femininity that is just as excessive, if not raunchier, as the one presented in “WAP.”

“Vagina is the internal part of our genitalia and vulva refers to the labia and the external part. Until we have a better word to talk about it as a whole, pussy is the best we’ve got.” This quote is not from a recognized publication, and probably not even from the thousands of writings – mostly online posts and memes – celebrating Cardi B’s new anthem. But even if we cannot ascertain its author, its resonance on the inherent sexism of language (and especially the English language) is clear. The definition points to all that is unsaid with regards to female anatomy. It also points to a reflection on how different languages may refer to female genitalia. Ferrante’s novel’s original language – Italian – unlike English, can literally count hundreds of words that translate into pussy. This is not an exaggeration. Some have suggested that almost every noun in the Italian language can be feminized to mean precisely that. And while the latter might indeed be an exaggeration, it is not so by a great length.

The Lying Life of Adults talks about growing up female and exceptionally intelligent in a world where intelligence is the exclusive domain of men. It talks about getting to know oneself, and it explores themes like female desire and queerness, not just around sex, but in all aspects of life. The protagonist is a girl whom we follow through her adolescence. Her interrogations on truth and deception, as well as femininity and sex, are as important as her exceptional intellectual growth. They are also undetachable from the many iterations of the word “pussy” that Italian offers. The story suggests that what we could call the “high” and the “low” (of womanhood, culture, behavior, coping mechanisms, mere humanity) are all included, all part of its overbearing image. The pussy is always present in the story, whether it is mentioned or not, and it is embodied by all: male characters, female characters and places alike; but it is elevated to a quasi-mystical level when it refers to the young protagonist and her alter ego, the “ugly” aunt Vittoria, whose mysterious appeal sets the story in motion. Vittoria is a “threatening and enveloping woman” who summons reminiscences to evil stepmothers of fairy tales “a childhood bogeyman, a lean, demonic silhouette, an unkempt figure

¹ Cardi B. *WAP*, Featuring Megan Thee Stallion. Atlantic Records, 2020.
Spotify, open.spotify.com/album/2ogiazbrNEx0kQHGI5ZBTQ

lurking in the corners of houses when darkness falls” (10). She also has the power of attraction of Fellini’s divas, or Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1962), the all-encompassing female devourer. She’s the pivotal, primordial pussy of the book. And, unsurprisingly, the first word that describes her is *arcigna*. The term *arcigna*, loosely translatable with “grim,” “scowling” is more immediately associated with the rhyming word *fregna* – one of the hundreds of iterations of the word pussy mentioned above, one of the ragy-est and most satisfying; very different from the more common, and somehow more acceptable *figa/fica* (slit, hole), or the quintessentially Neapolitan *fessa*.

Along with the video accompanying it, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “WAP” has been characterized as one of the dirtiest and most liberating anthems – a much-needed celebration of female sexuality. And it is indeed all of that. But the images accompanying the song are mostly bathed in clear, fresh water, dressed up in stain-free and well pressed outfits, shiny, gold-plated butt cheeks and breasts. In the stunning video for “WAP,” the only hair we see belong to elaborate hairstyles and exotic animals – them too, seemingly scentless. In the lyrics – sexy, outrageously descriptive, elaborate lyrics – the gushiest image is that of macaroni in a pot, which is undoubtedly warmer, more appealing and edible than the arousing *and* repulsive orange crush aunt Vittoria prepares for the prepubescent protagonist on their first encounter, in a scene that contains all the shock of a rite of passage.

For these reasons, it was somewhat confusing to see intellectual columnists of celebrated journals like the *New Yorker*, express articulate doubts about Ferrante’s new novel, setting the focus of the narration to the uneasiness of aging, the protagonist’s obsessions about lying, her own appearance, and “the disaffections of her privileged adolescence, some thirty years ago.”² Sure, Ferrante’s story is more complex than this review may suggest. It also contains slips in the narrative that make this book less appealing, less immediately readable than the previous Neapolitan series, and closer to her earlier works. But what is most interesting, in the *Lying Life of Adults*, is that the pussy is, metaphorically, the absolute protagonist, the receptacle of all intellectual and mundane life. It is not, like in “WAP,” relegated to imaginary, perfectly curated Alice-like rooms, where fashionable, elegant Kardashians may take a peek. In *The Lying Life of Adults* the pussy expands to encompass all of the contradictory and cavernous spaces that the city of Naples opens up to its readers. It looks and smells weird, and, just like Aunt Vittoria, *non si cura e non si depila* (it does not take care of itself and does not shave). In other words, that pussy is real.

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² Judith Thurman, “Hostile Love,” *The New Yorker*, 31 August 2020, 67.