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Abstract: The *femminielli* are both gender non-conforming people and traditional entities of the city of Naples. They could be described as effeminate men who live and feel like women and who practise forms of sex labour, but not necessarily. The femminiello identity intersects the concepts of homosexuality, transvestism and transgenderism and contextually transcend their meaning. This paper analyses the coexistence of both sacred (Madonna) and profane (Whore) archetypes in the characterization of the Neapolitan femminielli. This article reconstructs how the femminielli participate in an intrinsically liminal nature: a marginal life between masculine and feminine, between the miraculous and the voluptuous, between the outside world and an identity that can only exist in the alley. The argument is conducted through a multidisciplinary approach that welcomes linguistic, anthropological, ethnographic and historical methodologies, essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of this wholly Neapolitan identity. In order to better grasp how two female archetypes could be adapted to a gender and sexual identity that cannot be inscribed within traditional binaries, both academic and autobiographical sources as well as criminal reports have been consulted. What emerges from this research is how the very nature of the femminielli is profoundly Neapolitan and indeed reflects the duality of the city itself, being both avant-garde and patriarchal. A question that remains unanswered is that of the longevity of this gender identity in an increasingly globalised future: will the femminielli be able to find their space between tradition and innovation?

Keywords: Femminielli, transgender, transvestism, sex labor, liminality

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I *Femminielli*: A Gender Variant Existence Between Sacred and Profane in the City of Naples

JULES DE BELLIS

Introduction

The figure of the Neapolitan *femminiello* offers a glimpse of the complex reality of an extremely contradictory city: one with mythological roots deeply connected to a feminine symbolic universe and yet so overtly patriarchal, a city profoundly shaped by a pervasive religiosity that is at once devotional, superstitious, farcical, and popular, as I will detail below. The *femminielli*—historically described as effeminate men who live and *feel* as women and who may or may not practice “the profession” (sex work)—occupy a liminal position at the intersection between homosexuality, transvestism and transgenderism, while transcending the meaning of these academic categories.¹ Understood as historically situated figures rather than identity-based reinterpretations, the *femminielli* are today disappearing, a phenomenon linked to globalization and democratization of knowledge. These processes contributed to the abandonment of a life in the *alley* by younger generations, producing instead heightened discriminatory sentiments and violent episodes previously absent among non-queer citizens and leading to generational tensions with the contemporary Italian LGBTQIA+ community.²

In this paper, I aim to highlight the coexistence of sacred and profane elements in the existence of Neapolitan *femminielli*, focusing on their archetypal dual role of *Madonna* and *Whore*, suspended between masculinity and femininity. I begin with a linguistic analysis of the term *femminiello*, its meanings, and its imaginaries.³ From there, I turn to an inquiry into the symbolism that predates the emergence of the *femminielli* in Naples, whose origins are as ancient as the city itself.⁴ I then examine the sexual and gendered nature of these individuals, so archaic and at the same time somehow postmodern, an identity of considerable complexity, difficult to conceptually internalize for those who have not experienced the reality of the *alley*.⁵ After this, I introduce the miraculous figure of the *femminielli* regarded as persons capable of warding off the evil eye (*malocchio*) and entrusted by the community with the task of accompanying the neighborhood across life’s various stages.⁶ I also consider how, when some *femminielli* leave their *alleys*, they continue to generate culture, as in the case of La Tarantina, a *femminiello* of Apulian origin adopted by the Neapolitan city at a very young age, who left an incredible mark on Rome’s *dolce vita* in the 1950s.⁷

¹ See Atlas, *Die Femminielli von Neapel*; Bertuzzi, *I femminielli*; Ceccarelli, *Mamma Schiavona*; D’Amora, “La figura del femminiello/travestito”; Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Simonelli and Carrano, “Le mariage des femminielli”; Simonelli and Carrano, “Mito e Seduzione”; Vesce, *Altri Transiti*; Vincent and Manzano, “History and Cultural Diversity”; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull’uscio*; Zito and Valerio, *Femminielli: Corpo, Genere, Cultura*; Zito and Valerio, *Genere: Femminielli*.

² The *alley* is understood as the quintessential space of the *Femminielli*. In this context, the term operates as an abstract, collective notion that points not to one specific site, but to the broader constellation of narrow streets that constitute the social and cultural terrain in which *Femminielli* live, circulate, and enact their roles. See Mauriello, “Altri Generi in Performance”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti”; Mauriello, “In Corpore Trans”; Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Vesce, “Et Io ne vidi uno a Napoli”; Zito and Valerio, “I Femminielli Napoletani: Un Terzo Genere.”

³ See Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁴ See Vesce, “Et Io ne vidi uno a Napoli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio’”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull’uscio*; Zito and Valerio, “I Femminielli Napoletani.”

⁵ See Ekins and King, *The Transgender Phenomenon*; Gressgård, “When Trans Translates into Tolerance”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti”; Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities*; Stryker, Currah and Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?”; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁶ See Bertuzzi, *I femminielli*; Ceccarelli, *Mamma Schiavona*; Clemente, “Subverting or Essentialising Gender?”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁷ Although this is a particularly compelling narrative, I will not dwell extensively on this specific cultural aspect. For a more thorough discussion, see Romano, *La Tarantina*.

The figure of La Tarantina enables us to closely examine a central, though not universal, aspect of the experience of many femminielli: the practice of “the oldest profession.”⁸ I conclude by exploring how this profession has profoundly shaped the trajectories of many femminielli in their encounters with the judicial system and how these experiences continue to inform contemporary reflections on their legal status and public perception.⁹

Each of these sections frame lived experiences within the archetypal *Madonna-Whore* dualism. The paper approaches the topic through multiple perspectives: linguistics, mythology, folklore, autobiographical stories, and scholarly analyses, adopting a kaleidoscopic archival method essential for grasping the multifaceted nature of these figures. I will not attempt a historical reconstruction of the evolution of the figure of the femminiello; rather, my focus remains on its archetypal roles. My aim is to propose a new interpretive lens through which to understand these figures and to stimulate further developments in scholarly inquiry.

Femminielli/Femminelle

In this first section, I conduct a linguistic analysis of the term femminiello, drawing upon the hypotheses advanced by Eugenio Zito, an anthropologist at the University of Naples Federico II. Zito stands as one of the foremost scholars of the femminielli's humanistic landscape, owing to his extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2002.¹⁰ The term designating this particular gender identity can be divided into two components: the root *femmin-* and the suffix *-iello*. The first element situates the subject within the feminine gender, either in terms of identity—*feeling* and/or presenting as a woman. The second component, by contrast, is a masculine diminutive or endearing suffix commonly used with nouns of the masculine gender. Consequently, the term appears inherently self-contradictory: on the one hand, *-iello* may evoke a diminutive sense of being—or not being—a woman, or suggest an incomplete or unfinished state; on the other, it might signify a form of affectionate irony, an embrace of linguistic playfulness that transforms potential distress or trauma into tender humor. In essence, it is the suffix *-iello* that encapsulates the word's intrinsic ambiguity. This becomes particularly evident if the final *-o*, which in Italian denotes masculine grammatical gender, in contrast to the feminine root *femmin-*, is rendered in Neapolitan as a schwa (ə). This sound, articulated in a neutral tongue position, could be interpreted as an expression of “gender neutrality,” though this neutrality is linguistically denied by the unmistakably masculine infix *-i-*. The result is a remarkably intricate and self-reflexive linguistic construct. Patrizia Bianchi, however, offers a divergent interpretation, contending that the suffix *-iello* / *-ielli* should not be understood as diminutive, but rather as a new lexical item designating a category.¹¹

Zito has thus hypothesized that the anthropological function of the femminiello resides in embodying a rigidly patriarchal collective defense mechanism. Through this framework, a male subject engaged in passive homosexual relations is symbolically reclassified as female, or as an unequivocally defective female. Within this interpretive structure, the very name operates as a linguistic instrument for conferring a form of identity, offering unconscious gratification to those who identify neither strictly as men nor as women yet recognize themselves within this designation. Zito therefore discerns in the term a dual essence: not only gendered but also social, simultaneously a marker of attraction and exclusion, of affection and irritation.

Nonetheless, the word femminiello—though long employed in popular and artistic contexts—does not appear in any dictionary prior to the 1980s. In the *Italian Neapolitan Vocabulary*, one instead finds the variant *femminella*, defined as “gossip girl” or “gossip boy.”¹² According to the

⁸ See De Blasio, *Usi e costumi dei camorristi*; Della Porta, *Della fisionomia dell'uomo*; Romano, *La Tarantina*; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli.”

⁹ See Romano, *La Tarantina*.

¹⁰ See Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

¹¹ See Bianchi, “Femminielli.”

¹² Andreoli, *Vocabolario Napoletano Italiano*, 268.

Nuovo De Mauro dictionary, the term is documented as having entered broader usage in 1983 and is defined as “transvestite prostitute.”¹³ This definition, however, reduces the complexity of the femminiello to merely two dimensions—transvestism and sex work—thereby overlooking the rich anthropological, cultural, and symbolic layers that constitute this identity. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that, in this sense, the variant *femminella* had long been used alongside the slurs *ricchione* (faggot) and *vasetto* (fairy/poof) well before the term entered academic discourse. Abele De Blasio, a Neapolitan physician and anthropologist of the nineteenth century, offers one of the earliest written accounts in the chapter ‘O *spusarizio masculino* (The Male Marriage) of his work *Usi e costumi dei camorristi* (Habits and Customs of the Camorra). There, he defines the femminielli as “passive pederasts by profession,” situating them entirely within a delinquent and marginal social framework.¹⁴

It is important to note that, during fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2014, Marzia Mauriello observed a distinct linguistic liminality surrounding the femminielli. Specifically, the term femminiello is employed exclusively by outsiders—those who do not belong to this community—whereas the individuals themselves consistently refer to one another as *femmenelle*, adopting the feminine form in every instance.¹⁵

The Dual Nature of the City of Naples

The historical origins of the femminielli long predate the nineteenth century. Artistic evidence of their presence in Naples—along with the use of their name—can be traced as far back as the eighteenth century. A notable example is the renowned painting *Il Femminiello*, a striking and disquieting oil on canvas by Giuseppe Bonito, now housed in the Portland Art Museum.¹⁶ The work depicts an individual exhibiting distinctly masculine features, such as the faint outline of a mustache above the upper lip, dressed in women’s clothing, while a younger male figure adorns them with a red coral necklace, a traditional Neapolitan symbol of good fortune. Luck—an element that, as will be later discussed, constitutes a defining trait of the Neapolitan femminiello’s *saintly* personality—emerges here as a symbolic motif. The presence of a goiter and a missing tooth situates the subject within a lower socio-economic milieu, reinforcing a sense of popular authenticity, while the subject’s direct gaze toward the viewer establishes an almost egalitarian relationship, an uncommon feature for representations of marginal figures in that era. Bonito, celebrated for his court portraiture and genre scenes, employs in this work a subtle play of inversion and visual engagement: the juxtaposition of a delicate young male figure with a more masculine-presenting femminiello invites the viewer into a complex meditation on gender, identity and the performativity of social roles. Comparable figures appear in certain eighteenth-century English satirical prints, though invariably rendered in a tone of mockery and moral admonition.¹⁷ Bonito’s painting, by contrast, while foregrounding details suggestive of poverty and marginality, preserves a direct and unflinching gaze, eschewing any trace of caricature or ridicule. As the sole known pre-photographic depiction of a femminiello, this work constitutes an invaluable visual document for the study of gender variance in European art and offers a crucial point of reference for scholars approaching the subject from an art-historical or gender studies perspective.

Evidence of the femminielli’s existence, however—articulated in different terms—can be traced as far back as the sixteenth century. The late Renaissance scholar Giovanni Battista Della

¹³ *Il Nuovo De Mauro*, s.v. “femminiello,” accessed: December 5 2025, <https://dizionario.internazionale.it/parola/femminiello>.

¹⁴ See De Blasio, *Usi e costumi dei camorristi*.

¹⁵ See Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

¹⁶ See Bonito, *Il Femminiello*.

¹⁷ See British Museum, “Satire on Macaronis.” In this context, the *Macaronis* were young men of the British elite in the latter half of the eighteenth century who cultivated an ostentatious lifestyle, distinguished by elaborate coiffures, vividly colored, tightly fitted attire, and a manner perceived as effeminate. For a more detailed analysis, see Janes, “A Queer Taste for Macaroni.”

Porta refers to such figures in his *Della fisionomia dell'uomo* (Of the Physiognomy of Man), recounting his encounter with an effeminate individual in Naples, similar to those observed in Sicily. Della Porta associates this figure with the so-called Renaissance *sodomite*, a category describing an adult homosexual male who assumes the active role in sexual relations with a passive adolescent partner, who, upon reaching maturity, would then adopt the active position.¹⁸ Della Porta thus directs our attention to the broader Mediterranean context, where a distinct form of homosexuality was historically attested, particularly along coastal regions. Within this cultural framework, the passive partner in a male-male relationship, identified as *homosexual*, could at times adopt feminine attire or mannerisms. Such gendered disguise served to affirm and legitimize his sexual—and, by extension, social—role within a system structured around active and passive hierarchies rather than modern notions of identity.¹⁹ Conversely, the active partner in such relationships was typically identified with the status of a heterosexual man. This conception, projected onto the femminielli, can be traced back to earlier cultural paradigms: the *molles* of ancient Rome and the *kinaidos* of classical Greece, as well as the transvestite prostitutes of fifth-century Carthage and the *malakoi* referenced in biblical texts. Each of these figures reflects a longstanding Mediterranean tradition in which gender expression and sexual roles were defined not by identity but by performative and relational dynamics.²⁰ These figures were deeply intertwined with the myth of the androgyne, the bi-sexual human conceived as both perilous and numinous, embodying a liminal state between the mortal and the divine. This archetype, recurrent throughout Mediterranean mythologies, symbolizes unity through duality and serves as a potent metaphor for transgression, sacredness and the reconciliation of opposites.²¹ It is precisely this dual nature that links the femminielli to the very origins of the city of Naples, whose founding myths are themselves steeped in themes of hybridity, transformation, and the coexistence of opposing forces.

According to myth, the city was founded by the siren Parthenope—a hybrid creature, half woman and half bird—who embodies a form of self-sufficient, virginal femininity, as implied by the very etymology of her name. Parthenope, emotionally devastated by the torment of her unrequited love or perhaps her death-driven desire for Odysseus, becomes a symbol of tragic passion and generative transformation, her body giving rise to the city that bears her name.²² The image of the self-sufficient, virginal woman also reappears in the cult of the Great Mother—known in this region as Cybele—an archetypal synthesis of generative fullness and transformative power.²³ The *Gallae*, emasculated and cross-dressed priests, worshiped Cybele on Mount Partenio, now known as Montevergine, the sacred home of *Mamma Schiavona*, a local manifestation of the Black Madonna deeply revered by the femminielli. This enduring devotion underscores the continuity between ancient cultic traditions and the spiritual practices that continue to shape Neapolitan popular religiosity.²⁴ In the myth, Cybele serves as the guardian of the cyclical interplay between life and death, a dynamic embodied in the castration of Attis, a divine figure born from the fertile blood of her hermaphroditic offspring, Agdistis, and the nymph Nana. Cybele takes Attis as her consort, only to bring about his death and subsequent rebirth as her priest, thus enacting a sacred drama of sacrifice, regeneration and eternal return. By extension, the *Gallae* practiced ritual self-castration, donned female attire and assumed traditionally feminine roles in order to attain ecstatic union with the goddess. Through these acts of bodily and symbolic transformation, they sought to transcend human limitations and participate in Cybele's divine, regenerative power.²⁵ With the

¹⁸ See Della Porta, *Della fisionomia dell'uomo*.

¹⁹ See Cantarella, *Secondo Natura*; Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia*.

²⁰ See Vesce, “Et Io ne vidi uno a Napoli”; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

²¹ For a more in-depth analysis of the myth of the androgyne, see Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

²² See Zito, “Femmin-ielli.”

²³ See Neuman, *La Grande Madre*; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

²⁴ See Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull'uscio*.

²⁵ See D'Agostino, “Travestirsi.”

advent of Christianity, this cult was gradually supplanted by Marian devotion. Yet, vestiges of its earlier forms persisted—and continue to persist—in certain ritual expressions that incorporate elements of transvestism and transsexualism. These continuities reveal the enduring presence of gender liminality within the sacred sphere, reframed through the syncretic lens of Christian worship.²⁶ Each year on Candlemas (February 2nd), the femminielli ascend Montevergine to the sanctuary of *Mamma Schiavona*, the Black Madonna. This pilgrimage—known in Neapolitan as the *juta*—is accompanied by castanets, *tammorre* (frame drums) and cymbals, as well as vivid, often feminine attire, offering clear evidence of continuity with the ancient priesthood of the *Gallae*.²⁷ According to Neuman, this symbolic and analytical dimension proves particularly valuable for conceptualizing the phenomenon of religious transsexuality, as it illuminates the ritualized negotiation of gender, embodiment and the sacred within a historically syncretic tradition.²⁸

It is worth recalling that Naples is also the city of San Gennaro, whose miraculous liquefaction of blood—often described as the city’s “menstruation”—stands as a further example of a sacred manifestation that symbolically transcends the categories of gender and sex.²⁹ It can thus be inferred that, by virtue of their miraculous associations with the Virgin, Cybele and the Great Mother, the femminielli partake in the archetypal figure of the *Madonna*.

The *half men—half women*

The subjectivity embodied by the femminielli resists straightforward definition. Yet, through the lens of contemporary terminology, it may be described as *gender-variant*: a gender identity whose expressions and social roles diverge from hetero-cis-patriarchal norms and expectations.³⁰ They stand as liminal figures, situated at the intersection of genders, poised between tradition and transgression, constraint and liberation.³¹ The femminielli, however, are not unique within what might today be termed forms of traditional queerness. The transcendence of the male-female binary has found expression in myths and cultural representations across the world, generating a constellation of collective imaginaries that have long attracted anthropological attention. Examples include the *Berdache* among the Mohave of North America, the *Hijras* of the Indian subcontinent, the *Muxé* of Zapotec society in Mexico, the *Fa’afafine* of the Samoan Islands and the *Mariquitas* of Andalusia, Spain, among others.³² And, of course, the *Travesti* in Brazil, whose experience will later serve here as a comparative framework for examining the distinctions between their practices and those of the femminielli, particularly in relation to sexual labor.³³

Their aspiration to pass as something else and the accompanying pursuit of social acceptance nevertheless serve to reinforce the very system of gender binarism they appear to resist. This dynamic manifests in the pursuit of bodily conformity, achieved through transvestism and the performance of stereotypically gendered behaviors.³⁴ The femminielli, therefore, embody the feminine model in a performative, histrionic and exaggerated manner, at times verging on caricature. In doing so, they often assume the role of neighborhood jesters, figures of playful irony

²⁶ For a more detailed examination of the origins of the cult of the Madonna of Montevergine, see Zito, “Femminielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio’”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull’uscio*.

²⁷ See Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’” To explore a contemporary representation of this tradition, I recommend reading Oteri, *Femminiello Pride*, as it is accompanied by evocative photographic documentation that visually enriches the analysis and captures the ritual’s symbolic atmosphere.

²⁸ See Neuman, *La Grande Madre*.

²⁹ See Arcidiacono, *Napoli diagnosi di una città*; Dauverd, “The Miracle of San Gennaro”; Niola, *Totem e Ragù*.

³⁰ See Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

³¹ See Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

³² See Cáceres Feria and Valcuende del Río, “Globalización y diversidad sexual”; Callender and Kochems, “The North American Berdache”; D’Agostino, “Il sesso ambiguo”; D’Agostino, “Travestirsi”; Herdt, *Third Sex*; Mageo, “Male Transvestism”; Miano Borruso, *Hombre, mujer y muxé*; Miano Borruso, “Muxé et Femminielli”; Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman*; Schmid, “Paradise Lost?”; Vesce, “Fa’afafine.”

³³ See Kulick, “The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes.”

³⁴ See Gagné and Tewksbury, “Conformity Pressures”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

around whom the community gathers to engage in affectionate, if teasing, amusement.³⁵ Thus, the role of the femminielli within the social economy of the *alley* is fundamentally symbolic. Through their public acts of desecration, they both reaffirm and expose the constructed nature of social reality, revealing its performative dimension.³⁶ This theatrical dimension is further affirmed by their aesthetic presentation. Traditionally, aside from certain accessories, femminielli do not habitually wear women's clothing such as skirts or high heels in everyday life. On the contrary, they are often seen in public dressed in men's attire, almost unrecognizable except in specific contexts. These include moments when they engage in street-based sex work, evoking the archetype of the *Whore*, or when they participate in collective religious and communal events—weddings, births, baptisms, funerals and pilgrimages—where they embody the *Madonna*.³⁷

When it comes to their sexual and romantic orientation, the picture becomes even more complex. Mauriello's inquiry into the possibility of romantic relationships between femminielli elicited reactions of disgust and horror, revealing an underlying perception that such a union would constitute a relationship between two women, and thus, from their perspective, a homosexual one. By contrast, relationships with active male partners are understood as heterosexual, since femminielli, though biologically male, experience and perform a lived femininity. This reasoning reflects the patriarchal logic of what has been described as *mediterranean homosexuality*, a framework structured not around identity but around active and passive roles within sexual relations.³⁸ An analysis of their testimonies and interviews reveals that femminielli not only refrain from identifying as gay, but also reject identification as trans. They distance themselves from the bodily transformations—whether hormonal or surgical—typically, though not necessarily, undertaken by transgender individuals in response to body dysphoria. In their view, such interventions entail a dual transgression: a forfeiture of sensual pleasure on one hand and, on the other, a sin against divine will. For the femminielli, their condition is perceived as God-given, an existence intentionally situated midway between the masculine and the feminine.³⁹ Similarly, transgender and transsexual women originating outside the *alley* do not identify themselves as *femmenelle*, regarding the term as anachronistic and inextricably tied to lower-class environments and, by extension, to the sphere of sex work.⁴⁰

In this sense of non-affiliation with either gay or trans identities, the Brazilian *Travesti* may also be considered comparable, though their enactment of gender differs significantly. The *Travesti* embody femininity in their daily lives and in their passive sexual relationships with their boyfriends—aligning themselves with women in terms of gender performance—yet they assume the active role with male clients during sex work. For them, prostitution constitutes a defining marker of identity, encapsulated in the assertion that one cannot be a *Travesti* “without having sex for money.”⁴¹ The femminielli, by contrast, do not necessarily engage in sex work throughout their lives and even when they do they experience and perform it from the position of women. It may therefore be posited that the femminielli share with the *Travesti* not so much a common gender role as a comparable fluidity of gender, an adaptive context-dependent mode of embodiment that resists fixed categorization.

Zito, however, situates the femminielli within the broader transgender spectrum, identifying them as individuals whose gender identity diverges from that assigned at birth. In doing so, he aligns them—albeit not in an entirely equivalent sense—with the notion of a “third gender,”

³⁵ See Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Mauriello, “Altri Generi in Performance”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

³⁶ See Mauriello, “In Corpore Trans”; Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Mauriello, “Altri Generi in Performance”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

³⁷ See Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

³⁸ See Cantarella, *Secondo Natura*; Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia*; Mauriello, “Se Sei Gay”; Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

³⁹ See Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

⁴⁰ See Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti.”

⁴¹ See Kulick, “The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes.”

a category the femminielli themselves describe as “God’s third option.”⁴² This concept, in turn, draws the femminielli closer to the Indian *Hijras*, not only through their shared historical association with sex work as a means of survival, but also through their comparable gender identity.⁴³ As discussed in this paragraph, the archetypal figure of the Whore may thus be discerned not only in the femminielli, but also in other forms of traditional queerness found across diverse cultural contexts worldwide.

Lady Luck

Another trait the Neapolitan *femminielli* share with the other gendered identities discussed in the preceding paragraph is their association with good fortune and their role as bearers and mediators of luck within the collective imagination.⁴⁴ Being hybrid and liminal traditionally renders them auspicious and, in some way, sacred.⁴⁵ Even today, they continue to enact the rituals that mark life’s fundamental stages in a distinctly theatrical manner: birth, the transition to adulthood symbolized by marriage, as well as death, the afterlife, and fortune.⁴⁶ Naples, often described as the “female city,” permits male bodies to express a distinctive form of femininity even within the confines of a patriarchal system rooted in the Greek colonization of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.⁴⁷ Yet this system was likely constructed upon the intricate mythical polyphonies of the Mediterranean feminine imagination, which may have profoundly shaped the Neapolitan cultural spirit through a form of urban transgenderism.⁴⁸

The *femminielli* are the protagonists of the *’o spusarizio masculine* (the male marriage), a communal performance of gynemimesis in which one *femminiello* assumes the role of the groom—symbolically “re-masculinizing” himself for the occasion—while another, dressed as a bride, plays his partner. The ceremony, enacted with the collective participation of the neighborhood and in the absence of any institutional authority capable of legally recognizing their union, re-enacts and subverts the conventions of traditional heterosexual marriage.⁴⁹ This symbolic theatricality reveals an underlying notion: to embody the male role within the couple, one must first reclaim an original femininity, suggesting that masculinity itself emerges through a performative return to, and rearticulation of, the feminine.⁵⁰ It is, therefore, a subversive and surreal rite, one that transcends the real, exceeds normative boundaries and stands outside the ordinary structures of patriarchal society.⁵¹

This dual embodiment of the Madonna and the Whore archetypes also manifest in another communal ritual, *’a figliata* (the childbirth), a performative event in which the *femminella* who had

⁴² See Herdt, *Third Sex*; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings.”

⁴³ For a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of *Hijra* sex workers, see *Global Network of Sex Work Projects*, “Hijra Sex Worker Activists.” For contemporary reporting, refer to Khaleeli, “India’s Third Gender.” For broader anthropological perspectives, consult Herdt, *Third Sex* and Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*.

⁴⁴ For a concise introduction to this subject, see Diavolo, “Gender Variance.”

⁴⁵ See Mauriello, “Corpi Dissonanti”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull’uscio*; Zito and Valerio, *Femminielli. Corpo, Genere, Cultura*; Zito and Valerio, *Genere: Femminielli*.

⁴⁶ See Mauriello, “Altri Generi in Performance”; Mauriello, “In Corpore Trans”; Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Ranisio, “Attraversamenti di Genere”; Zito and Valerio, *Corpi sull’uscio*; Zito and Valerio, *Femminielli. Corpo, Genere, Cultura*; Zito and Valerio, *Genere: Femminielli*.

⁴⁷ Naples is often described as a “female city” in local popular culture. This is not an academic label or a term coined by a specific scholar. It comes from everyday ways in which people in Naples and the wider Campania region talk about their city. In common speech, Naples is imagined as “feminine” because it is seen as emotional, passionate, welcoming, and closely tied to the body. People often describe the city as warm and embracing, almost maternal. The expression reflects a widespread local feeling and cultural imagination rather than any formal or theoretical classification.

⁴⁸ See Belmonte, *La fontana rotta*; Galasso, *L’Altra Europa*.

⁴⁹ See Simonelli and Carrano, “Le mariage des femminielli”; Simonelli and Carrano, “Mito e Seduzione”; Vesce, *Altri Transiti*; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁵⁰ See Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁵¹ See Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

previously portrayed the bride symbolically gives birth to a child, typically represented by a wooden puppet bearing an oversized black and red phallus. Staged nine months after the *spusarizio*, this parody of the natural act of childbirth unfolds amid the jubilant applause and laughter of the assembled crowd.⁵²

These performances are imbued with a sacred dimension through the collective participation of the *alley*'s inhabitants, without whom no act of recognition would be possible. Young and old, men and women, even children, all contribute to affirming the femminielli's full gender recognition within the community. The communal participation of the audience evokes the sacred function of classical Greek theatre.⁵³ As Mauriello notes, many femminielli are, in fact, artists, actors and singers, blurring once more the boundaries between ritual, theater and lived identity.⁵⁴ All these examples reinscribe them within the archetypal figure of the Madonna, an embodiment capable of virginal birth and the performance of miracles.

Vico Femminelle

Quartieri Spagnoli, Quartiere Sanità, Montecalvario, Avvocata, and L'Imbreccata—the latter notable for its *Vico Femminelle*—are among the neighborhoods cited in Salvatore Di Giacomo's book *Prostitution in Naples in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries*. These areas were known to the authorities as centers of prostitution, particularly associated with the activities of transvestite sex workers.⁵⁵ The term *femminella* had already been linked to prostitution by De Blasio, who—one must note—was a fervent positivist and a devoted disciple of Mantegazza and Lombroso. He collaborated extensively with the Naples Police Headquarters and meticulously documented the customs and rituals of the Campanian underworld. In his accounts, he even recorded the names of certain *femminelle* arrested after being caught in the act of crime during a *spusarizio mascolino*, here a mock marriage between “passive pederasts by profession” and an unsuspecting victim, who was subsequently robbed during the so-called honeymoon in a local tavern.⁵⁶ De Blasio's text serves as an invaluable historiographical source, offering detailed insights into the bodily techniques employed by the *femminelle*. Details that, in turn, allow for a more nuanced reconstruction of Neapolitan social organization in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁷ It is a figure through which one may discern a deeply rooted strain of “Italic Orientalism,” one that interprets the *femminella* as a characteristic product of patriarchal and agrarian societies, wherein women's access to sexuality was restricted exclusively to the confines of heterosexual marriage.⁵⁸ Within such a framework, the

⁵² See Clemente, “Subverting or Essentialising Gender?”. Malaparte's novel *La pelle* contains an early literary reference to the ritual known as the *figliata*. In the chapter “Le rose di carne,” the narrator is invited by a group acquaintances to attend what they describe as a “sacred ceremony” performed secretly each year in Torre del Greco. Although Malaparte does not provide a full ethnographic description of the ritual, this passage is significant as one of the earliest twentieth-century literary attestations of the practice, that shows how the *figliata* was already part of Naples's symbolic and ritual imagination during the 1940s.

⁵³ In classical Greek theater, the audience played an actively engaged role, as attendance was a civic duty embedded in public festivals dedicated to Dionysus and provided a space in which the polis reflected upon itself; spectators participated in a shared ritual, responding, commenting, and experiencing emotions collectively, and this collective engagement was what made catharsis possible, such that neither theater nor catharsis could exist without an audience. Moreover, the fact that all roles, including female ones, were performed by men underscores that the theater functioned as a site of gender performance before a community that actively recognized and interpreted it, a dimension that resonates strongly with the performative and recognition-based dynamics found in the rituals of the femminielli.

⁵⁴ Mauriello, “What the Body Tells Us”; Mauriello, “Altri Generi in Performance.”

⁵⁵ De Blasio, *Usi e costumi dei camorristi*; Della Porta, *Della fisionomia dell'uomo*; Di Giacomo, *La prostituzione in Napoli*; Romano, *La Tarantina*; Zito, “Disciplinary Crossings”; Zito, “Femmin-ielli”; Zito, “Scene da un ‘Matrimonio.’”

⁵⁶ De Blasio, *Usi e costumi dei camorristi*, 153; Vesce, “Et Io ne vidi uno a Napoli.”

⁵⁷ I refer especially to De Blasio, *Usi e costumi dei camorristi*, 99–102.

⁵⁸ “Italic Orientalism” takes up this functionalist interpretation and reframes it within a broader representation of the South as archaic, sexually ambiguous, thereby transforming the *femminella* from a culturally situated figure into an exoticized symbol of a Southern Italy imagined as atavistic and non-modern. Within this framework, the figure of the

emergence of the *femminella* reflects the social need to construct an alternative feminine presence, one available for sexual relations outside the sanctioned bounds of matrimony.⁵⁹ Here, then—quite evidently—the archetype of the Whore emerges.

On the question of *femminielli* and sex work in the twentieth century, the autobiography of La Tarantina provides an exemplary case study (particularly illuminating within a discussion of the dual Madonna-Whore archetype). Her life story, recorded by Gabriella Romano in a compelling interview, offers valuable first-hand insight into the lived experience of this complex identity.⁶⁰ La Tarantina recounts that she began engaging in sex work alongside other *femminielli* shortly after her arrival in Naples, initially as a means of subsistence. Over time, she continued to perform at private gatherings in various cities—including Rome—motivated by personal pleasure as much as by necessity. She recalls being arrested numerous times, eventually losing count. Police officers regularly patrolled the *alleys* where she awaited clients, and on some nights she was detained multiple times. On one such occasion, an arrest led to her conscription into naval service in La Spezia; however, she was expelled less than a month later for engaging in illicit activities within the barracks. Notably, she emphasizes that her arrests were not for solicitation but for “offense to public decency,” a charge directly tied to her transvestism.⁶¹ On several occasions, she was not imprisoned with other detainees, but instead confined to isolation wards in psychiatric institutions, for months at a time. Ultimately, La Tarantina describes how she gradually withdrew from prostitution following her permanent return to Naples, as the growing presence of mafia-style criminality—particularly linked to drug trafficking—had rendered life in the alleys increasingly perilous, both for sex workers and for local residents.

Today, only a small number of *femminielli* continue to engage in sex work. Maria Carolina Vesce offers an illuminating hypothesis on this decline, drawing on extensive field research conducted between 2006 and 2014. She argues that their gradual disappearance—both as a gendered category and as practitioners of sexual labor—can be attributed to broader socio-cultural transformations. Specifically, Vesce links this phenomenon to the growing health and legal inclusion of transgender individuals in Italy, as well as to the effects of globalization. These developments, she suggests, have reduced the structural pressures that once compelled *femminielli* to rely on prostitution or participation in the informal economy as primary means of survival.⁶² Additionally, a defining feature of the *femminielli* up until the late twentieth century—their initiation into sex work at an extremely young age, in some cases even before the age of ten—must be critically understood within the framework of exploitation. Such early involvement is inseparable from the dynamics of solicitation, child prostitution and pedophilia, reflecting broader structures of marginalization and abuse that shaped their lived experience.⁶³ This evolution has led to the progressive disappearance not only of sex work as a means of livelihood for the *femminielli*, but also of the figure itself, except in contemporary reinterpretations that remain largely detached from the lived realities of the *alley*.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the figure of the Neapolitan *femminielli* through the lens of their dual participation in the archetypes of the Madonna and the Whore. At once, traditions such as the *spusarizio mascolino* and *'a figliata* bear witness to a worldview in which theatricality, irony and

femminella emerges as a constructed alternative feminine presence that both resides outside and yet responds to the patriarchal-agrarian structure in which women's access to sexuality is confined to marriage. De Donno, *Italian Orientalism*.

⁵⁹ Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia*.

⁶⁰ Romano, *La Tarantina*.

⁶¹ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 28.

⁶² See Vesce, “Et Io ne vidi uno a Napoli?”

⁶³ For a more in-depth analysis, see Redazione della Polizia Penitenziaria, “Il concetto criminologico di ‘femminiello.’”

spirituality coexist: these ceremonies reaffirm their role as figures of blessing and renewal, while also exposing the performative foundations of gender and identity within Neapolitan society. Yet also, the analysis of their involvement in sex work, particularly through emblematic figures like La Tarantina, and their affinity with other lived experiences of gender nonconformity worldwide have highlighted the intersection between economic necessity, social marginality and gendered expression. Far from representing opposing categories, these symbolic dimensions coexist within their identity, revealing a tension that defines the *femminiello* as both holy and transgressive, revered and marginalized, a synthesis of devotion and desire. By embracing both the Madonna and the Whore archetypes, the *femminielli* act as intermediaries between the sacred and the profane, expressing an ancient Mediterranean vision of hybridity.

In light of this trajectory, a further axis of reflection emerges between tradition and transformation. While the term *femminiello* remains strongly associated with the historical fabric of Naples, it is being rediscovered and reimagined by younger generations seeking new ways to articulate belonging and selfhood. This reappropriation suggests that, even as the social conditions that once defined them fade, the *femminielli* continue to embody the city's enduring dialogue between continuity and change. Their existence—situated between man and woman, devotion and irony, past and becoming—remains one of Naples's most compelling expressions of cultural and symbolic resilience.

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