

Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union

Volume 2023


Article 12

10-16-2023

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Recommended Citation

Lillestrand, Ryan A. (2023) "Smarginatura: The Art and Politics of Elena Ferrante," *Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union*: Vol. 2023, Article 12. DOI: 10.5642/urceu.VAJM3733

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/urceu/vol2023/iss1/12>

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Smarginatura: The Art and Politics of Elena Ferrante

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ABSTRACT

In the Neapolitan Quartet, a sprawling epic following the lives of two women in post-war Italy, the author, Elena Ferrante, explores the intimate relationship between politics and art, pushing at the borders we often construct between the two. At a particularly critical moment in the novels, the central character, Elena Greco, a poor girl from Naples who rises to the position of a successful novelist, is told by her more politically radical friends that she is not doing enough, that “this, objectively, is not the moment for writing novels.” But then, when is? The current political climate in Italy is in a state of immense uncertainty. While modern Italian history is littered with such windows, the rise of the Brothers of Italy party, bringing with it a far-right, nationalist political agenda the likes of which the country hasn’t faced in eighty years, is unquestionably extraordinary. Much of the existing discourse surrounding Ferrante’s work focuses on her portrayals of female friendship as well as cultural and family dynamics, less on the politics of the novels, which initially appears to evolve primarily in the background. However, a closer reading reveals layers of political dimension, deeply interwoven into nearly every facet of the novels: the depoliticization and disenfranchisement of women in Italian society, the lack of recognition for art by women writers, the deemphasis on art as a politically engaged, and even politically transformative, act. In doing a close reading of the central female characters in Ferrante’s work, as well as an examination of the enigma of the author herself, this paper hopes to illuminate both the artistic and political barriers faced by women writers in Italy today as well as the ways in which Ferrante—in her writing and her actions—proposes to navigate and transcend these spaces, ultimately demonstrating the immediacy, relevance, and crucial nature of politically engaged art for today’s Italy.

KEYWORDS

Elena Ferrante, Italian far-right, women writers, politics and literature

1. INTRODUCTION

Elena Ferrante, despite her ardent commitment to anonymity, is certainly the most internationally recognized Italian author writing today. Her works, particularly the Neapolitan Quartet, have garnered effusive praise from even the most restrained of literary critics. Over the course of four novels, Ferrante constructs a sweeping look at fifty tumultuous years in Italian history while simultaneously compressing its explosion of life and possibility into the space of a small Naples neighborhood and the intimacy of a lifelong friendship.

In the Neapolitan Quartet, a sprawling epic following the lives of two women in post-war Italy, Ferrante explores the intertwined relationship between politics and art, pushing at the borders we often construct between the two. This questioning of boundaries gives rise to Ferrante's signature concept of "smarginatura," a word that encompasses a broader ethos of subverting societally constructed margins built up around identity, societal expectations, and the roles historically ascribed to women in Italian society (De Luca, 2017). The idea of smarginatura carries enormous weight in Ferrante's work, both in her novels and the ways in which she has chosen to exist as a writer in the world. Its usage is pervasive, occasionally to the point of seeming malleable, but this is simply a symptom of its centrality in her conceptual framework. Smarginatura is not just the blurring of margins between character's experiences, or between the real and fictional world, but between the world as it is and as it could be. In the context of the Neapolitan Quartet, it is a resounding reminder of domestic life as a key center of political negotiation, and the everyday realities of women in a society insistent on marginalizing them to traditionally ascribed roles.

In the decade since *L'amica geniale*, translated as *My Brilliant Friend*, was first published in 2011, much of the discourse surrounding Ferrante's novels has praised them for their intimate perspectives on female friendship as well as her incisive portrayals of Italian cultural and family dynamics. This praise is well founded; Ferrante certainly has presented something truly unique to the literary landscape. And yet, this focused praise comes at the expense of perhaps missing the novels' most powerful dimension.

While the politics of the books often seem to evolve in the background, guided by the concept of smarginatura, the apparent boundaries of the novels themselves begin to dissolve—a powerful portrait of female friendship in post-war Naples becoming at the same time a forceful feminist critique of the Italian literary establishment. From this perspective, we then can see not only the evolution of Elena and Lila, the book's central characters, over the course of over fifty years, but also the layers of political dimension, deeply interwoven into nearly every facet of the novels: the depoliticization and disenfranchisement of women in Italian society, the lack of recognition for art by women writers, the deemphasis on art as a politically engaged, and even politically transformative, act.

At a particularly critical moment in the novels, the central character, Elena Greco, a poor girl from Naples who rises to the position of a successful novelist, is told by one of her more politically radical male friends that she is not doing enough, that "this, objectively, is not the moment for writing novels." But then, when is?

The current political climate in Italy is in a state of immense uncertainty. While modern Italian history is littered with such windows of governmental upheaval, the rise of the Brothers of Italy party, bringing with it a far-right, nationalist political agenda the likes of which the country hasn't faced in eighty years, is unquestionably extraordinary.

In doing a close reading of the central female characters in Ferrante's work, as well as an examination of the enigma of the author herself, this paper hopes to illuminate both the

artistic and political barriers faced by women writers in Italy today as well as the ways in which Ferrante—in her writing and her actions—proposes to navigate and transcend these spaces, ultimately demonstrating the immediacy, relevance, and crucial nature of this kind of art—politically engaged art—as a critical piece in the puzzle of navigating seasons of social and political upheaval the likes of which contemporary Italy faces today.

2. THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF ELENA GRECO

Italian literature, like the national literature of most countries, stems from a male-dominated academy with a long history of suppressing works written by women. The Strega Prize, the most prestigious literary award in Italy, as a singular example, has only had one woman winner in the past nineteen years (Pacífico, 2018). Many of the borders constructed to keep women from ascending to the heights of the Italian literary world arise from an ill-defined and misogynistic conception of what it means to be a ‘writer.’

It is a tenuous and tired division, rooted in criticizing books written by women as being ‘page-turners’ or ‘beach reads,’ emphasizing their focus on “emotional resonance and issues like sexism and gender roles” (Momigliano, 2019). As if these issues do not shape so many facets of life itself, as if, instead, only the gaze of a male author can capture some pure, literary essence of life. Perhaps one of the most glaring examples of this toxic phenomenon is the fact that Elena Ferrante’s brilliant quartet was not widely praised upon its release in Italy. As novelist Francesco Longo wrote in an article for *Il Messaggero*, “Ferrante is a powerful storyteller. But not a writer” (Ricci, 2015).

Indeed, Ferrante’s work was met with limited success in Italy in comparison to the explosive reception of her novels in the United States and then subsequently in the rest of the world. What had initially received only scattered praise and ultimately the brand of writing ‘for women’ in Italy, morphed into a literary sensation. Eventually, the term “Ferrante fever” was created in an attempt to name and convey the remarkable nature of the literary pandemic that began to sweep the world.

In 2015, Ferrante was nominated as a finalist for the Strega for the fourth and final novel in the Neapolitan Quartet, *Storia della bambina perduta*, but even this gesture felt as if it had an aura of formality, a recognition and admission of the fame she had garnered abroad. She was the only woman nominated, she did not win.

And yet, despite the lack of formal recognition for Italy’s most successful novelist of this generation, Ferrante has managed to chart her own path, skillfully negotiating, and indeed rising above, these imposed boundaries. In following the concept of *smarginatura*, it becomes clear how, despite the odds, Ferrante’s work has managed to achieve this impressive feat. Not simply skirting around the edges, but pressing at them—beginning the crucial work of tearing them down. With this in mind, the similarities between author and character, Elena Ferrante and Elena Greco, become central to the political work of the novels, the slippages—between the Elenas, between reality and fiction—are themselves the resonant critique. This repression of women writers in Italy is a theme that is compellingly explored throughout the Neapolitan Quartet through the eyes of its narrator: Elena Greco.

Elena is born and raised in a small, peripheral neighborhood of Naples, dominated in turn by loan sharks, fascists, and a rising mafia presence. Despite being born into relative poverty, she excels in school alongside the quartet’s other central protagonist, Lila. Elena and Lila are bonded by a magnetic attraction from the early days of elementary school—a bond that will remain, at times intense and at times distant, for the rest of their lives. In their younger years, locked into a competition that consumes their lives (both regarding the other

as their “brilliant friend”), the two become the best students in the school. However, Lila’s father forbids her to continue after finishing elementary school, expecting her to work in the family shoe shop instead. Elena, with the help of her teacher, is able to convince her parents to allow her to continue to pursue her studies. This singular moment becomes a life-altering moment as middle school becomes high school and eventually a spot in the prestigious Pisa Normale, where she graduates and promptly publishes a small, autobiographical novel that is met with unexpected success.

While the political climate of Italy in the second half of the 20th century serves as the backdrop for the entire quartet, it is at this point that the political upheaval of the country begins to blend with the interpersonal dynamics between characters. In demonstrating how different individuals and groups of people respond to Elena’s first novel, Ferrante captures the sweep of different perspectives (and barriers) that makes this type of politically-engaged fiction so difficult to write.

The first person Elena shows the manuscript is her soon-to-be fiance Pietro Airota. Pietro, the son of a famous professor, was born into a prominent and wealthy Northern Italian family and raised for life in academics. He is surprised at the manuscript, which is scrawled across the pages of a notebook, but politely accepts it as a gift from his fiancé. Elena immediately feels regret at having given it to him. Without explicitly saying so, Pietro dismisses the novel—a trivial indulgence in comparison to the ‘loftier’ and more ‘rigorous’ academic pursuits in which he is engaged: writing a book based on his thesis work, establishing the foundations of a respected academic career. When they leave the restaurant they’ve been sitting at, Elena notices that Pietro has forgotten the notebook on the table (Ferrante, 2015, p. 435).

When the two return home after graduation, Pietro to his home in Genoa, and Elena back to her family’s small apartment in the neighborhood, they exchange letters often. Elena expectantly waits for any indication that he has read her manuscript, that he has thoughts on it to share with her. Instead, they discuss the books and articles they are reading. In a letter discussing the emerging neo-avant-garde, Pietro writes:

I would like to make a book out of crumpled-up pieces of paper: you start a sentence, it doesn’t work, and you throw the page away. I’m collecting a few, I would have the pages printed just as they are, crumpled, so the random pattern of the creases is interwoven with the tentative, broken-off sentences. Maybe this is, in fact, the only literature possible today.” (Ferrante, 2015, p. 438)

Embedded within his thoughts, Elena sees his perception of her work:

“That last note struck me. I suspected, I remember, that that was his way of communicating to me that he had read my notebook and that that literary gift of mine seemed to him a product that had arrived too late. (Ferrante, 2015, p. 438)

It seems that for Pietro, both in his letter and throughout the novels, there are only two modes of being in the new world of 1960s Europe—that of the serious academic, and that of the revolutionary. In the negotiation between these two spaces, Elena’s novel has no purchase, it is, in his eyes, neither academically compelling nor politically charged, it in other words belongs to a past world and has no value in this one.

Months later, the novel now published and receiving growing recognition in Italy, Elena has a conversation about it with Franco, a friend and politically radical organizer who travels between Italy and France leading the burgeoning student movements in both countries. Unlike Pietro, Franco sees only one conceivable mode of being in the insurgence of the times: the revolutionary individual, seeking to directly subvert and overturn the halls of power. While the two men come from very different paths of life, their ultimate perception of Elena's novel is markedly similar. When Elena presses him for his true opinion of the book:

He compressed his lips again, and made up his mind: 'there's not much depth, Elena. Behind the petty love affairs and the desire for social ascent you hide precisely what it would be valuable to tell.'

'What?'

'Forget it, it's late. We should go to sleep.' And he tried to assume an expression of benevolent irony, but in reality he had the tone of someone who has an important task to complete and gives only sparingly to all the rest: 'you did everything possible, right? But this, objectively, is not the moment for writing novels.'

(Ferrante, 2014, pp. 79–80)

For Franco, it seems, nothing can be political but direct action, nothing can affect change but people in the streets. From Elena, he sees anything but political manifestos and speeches at student rallies as worthless distractions with no real political efficacy—petty love affairs and the desire for social ascent are not the stuff of revolutionary change.

When Elena returns home to the neighborhood after the novel's publication, she finds that her book has also made something of a splash there, but for another entirely different set of reasons. Amongst the crowd of her mostly staunchly conservative childhood friends and neighbors, the book is seen as scandalous. The neighborhood sees her novel, which possesses one explicit rape scene, as risqué and somehow defiling of her as a woman and their author. They are referred to as the "racy" pages, and generate a mixed response, with some people reproving her for having written and published such a thing, and others apparently buying it for this reason. The response feels as if it is demonstrating something deeply important to the politics and social life of an Italian woman, particularly a writer.

Elena's book is written with depth, emotion, and layers of meaning, reckoning with everything from coming of age in a poor, mafia-controlled Naples neighborhood to rape culture and the pervasion of strict gender roles and sexism in 20th-century Italian society (Ferrante, 2015, p. 433). And yet, when read, it is reduced almost to the status of the erotic novel, derided and diminished for the author's choice to address such issues with bravery and directness. This perspective poisons Elena's perception of her own book for some time, despite the growing praise and recognition it is receiving in other circles. These "racy" pages lead many of the men she encounters in the coming months to believe that Elena has 'loose morals' and several of them try to sleep with her or assume she must be open to the idea of one-night stands. In the early months of its release, the worth of having written it is only saved in her mind by its success in winning a couple of literary prizes, which she at first still dismisses as yet another symptom of the same elements that fascinated the neighborhood.

From its inception, it feels as if the novel is dismissed or criticized at every turn: it is not sufficiently academically rigorous, it is not truly 'literary,' it does not rise to the revolu-

tionary imperative of the historical moment, it deals with trivial and inconsequential aspects of life, it is a little thing, a distraction. Amidst this ocean of doubt, only two people seem to see something important in the novel, two people who praise her work and her natural gift as a writer. The first is Adele, Pietro's mother and her contact at the publishing house that released her book. From the beginning, Adele is a champion of the book, but also one that Elena sees as perhaps having a personal stake in the proceedings—the importance of her soon-to-be daughter-in-law's first true foray into the rarified air of Italy's academic elite, a moment marking her 'ascendance' from her anonymous and impoverished past. She calls the manuscript a mixture of "talent and luck" and again later, when notifying Elena that her book will be published, she remarks on "an unexpected opening in the editorial list" that, again, it was "not only very good but lucky" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 449). It seems that to Adele the emergence of the manuscript is a fortuitous event, making the match between Elena and her son more 'presentable' in some way.

Elena's only other source of close, personal praise comes from a trusted and highly valued source: Nino Sarratore, a longtime friend and classmate whom Elena has secretly loved for her entire life. At her first public reading at a bookstore in Milan, an "older man with thick eyeglasses" rises early on in the event and begins to remark on "the decline of publishing, which now looked more for money than for literary quality; then he moved on to the marketing collusion between critics and the cultural pages of the dailies; finally he focused on my book, first ironically, then, when he cited the slightly risqué pages, in an openly hostile tone." Elena attempts to respond before ultimately freezing until an anonymous voice from the audience interjects. Elena recalls that he

[s]poke in a contemptuously polemical way of the preceding speaker... He said we lived in a provincial country, where every occasion was an opportunity for complaining, but meanwhile no one rolled up his sleeves and reorganized things, trying to make them function. Then he went on to praise the modernizing force of my novel. I recognized him most of all by his voice, it was Nino Sarratore. (Ferrante, 2015, p. 471)

The critique of the bespectacled old man carries with it not just aesthetic literary criticism but political weight. Nino responds, in her defense, by praising the "modernizing force" of the novel in the face of complaint and complacency. While Elena is, for a vast majority of the time, forced to press on in the face of prevailing criticism, Nino becomes a source of vital encouragement, helping to remind her of the importance of her art in the politically and socially chaotic atmosphere of the time.¹

It is Nino who, even after Elena is married with two young daughters and feels as if she has no time to read or write, encourages her to begin again, to write into the energy and upheaval of the moment. From this encouragement, Elena produces her second work: a half-novel, half-essay feminist text that explores "the invention of woman by men" (Ferrante, 2014, p. 353). This second book reinvests broader public interest in her work and propels her into more explicitly politically active circles. In particular, the exhilarating early years of the student-led socialist movement in Europe, especially in France and Italy, as well as the burgeoning feminist movement. While the reader never gets an explicitly clear

1 Later on in the novels, Nino too ultimately abandons her, both criticizing her later work and departing for a life in the corrupt political labyrinth of government in Naples.

sense of what form this second book actually takes, Elena describes it as a blending of fiction, personal experience, and current events; it is a feminist critique exploring the ways in which women in Italian society, and society more broadly, are shaped in the image of men in a world built in many ways for men to succeed.

This is, in Elena's mind, finally a register of writing that is meaningfully politically engaged, more thoroughly steeped in the upheaval of the moment. She begins to travel, she attends and speaks at rallies in France. With the publication of her second book, Elena feels as if she is finally participating in the writing that matters: writing that doesn't conform or neatly fit into the pre-existing boundaries of genre, writing that explores new landscapes and modes of expression to capture the spark of the moment. When Elena gives it to Nino to read, he tells her that "you've written something hard to define, I don't know if it's an essay or a story. But it's extraordinary... it's not classifiable" (Ferrante, 2014, p. 370). In a time of social and political upheaval, Elena seemed to have tapped into a new form, one that seems to be both untraditional and better suited to the events of the time. Upon its publication, the book is a significant success in both Italy and France. However, while this season of travel, book events, and student rallies carries momentum for several weeks, it eventually comes to an end.

After her book tour in France, Elena returns home and resumes her daily life there, taking care of her two daughters and a husband who is still working on an interminable academic book alongside his teaching at the university. In Pietro's eyes, Elena's recent adventures are naive, supporting a political cause that he sees as radical and having little chance to succeed. Nino, shortly after the book is published, characteristically loses contact. Elena falls back into her staid life in Florence. It is a narrative that is repeated, in myriad different forms, throughout the novels—most prominently with Elena, but also with many of the other central female characters in the quartet.

Lila, Elena's closest friend since childhood, for example, is a brilliant student in elementary school, excelling beyond the abilities of her classmates and devouring books in the library, learning at every opportunity made available to her. She even writes a novella that Elena, stumbling across it decades later and rereading it, is still awed by; it has a style and power beyond its years, and in it, Elena is shocked to see the unbeknownst inspiration for her own first novel, the echoes of Lila's writing that still lives on in her work. However, when Lila is forced to begin working in her father's shoe shop at the end of middle school, her time as a student, and a writer, is over. While her sharp, perceptive mind enables her to excel in other areas of life, she abandons her writing. Later in life, when she is faced with the opportunity to write and reveal the injustices rife in the factory where she works, she refuses.

This cycle, sometimes overt, sometimes concealed, which Ferrante frequently demonstrates across the four novels, ultimately offers a searing portrait of the systematic depoliticization of women in the narrative and in Italian society. In powerful detail, Ferrante interrogates, through the stories of Elena and the women around her, the structures put in place to bar women from meaningfully engaging with the literary and political spheres, as well as the strict boundaries placed between literature and politics, a series of artificial walls that only further delineates what is capable of being politically engaged and producing any sort of change, and who is thought to be allowed to make that change.

It is this reality, woven into the structure of Ferrante's novels, but simultaneously so piercingly mirroring real life, that ultimately seems to dissolve the boundaries between poli-

tics and literature most thoroughly. As Ferrante builds a powerful critique of the boundaries built up between women and the Italian literary sphere, and between literature and the politics of the time, it becomes difficult to cleanly determine what is real life and what is fiction. What is the experience of Elena (Greco) in late-20th century Italy and what are the realities of Elena (Ferrante) in early-21st century Italy? The line can sometimes feel imperceptibly thin.

3. THE TWO ELENA'S: FERRANTE AS NOVELIST AND CHARACTER

The anonymity of Elena Ferrante has created, over the last two decades, one of the more prominent literary mysteries in recent memory. Ever since the publication of her first novel, *L'amore molesto* (1992), by Italian publisher Edizione e/o, Ferrante has worked with her editors to maintain a strict commitment to anonymity. In an early letter to her editor, before the publication of her first novel, Ferrante made her desires clear: "I won't participate in discussions and conferences... I won't accept prizes... I will never promote the book... I am absolutely committed in this sense to myself and my family" (Ferrante, 2016, p. 14). While her work has generated enormous interest, and desires to know the true identity of the author herself have only grown, Ferrante has stayed true to her initial desires, saying "I've already done enough for this long story: I wrote it. If the book is worth anything, that should be sufficient" (Ferrante, 2016, p. 14).

And yet, in today's literary landscape, this has been an enormously unpopular choice. Efforts have persisted for years, with countless impassioned readers attempting to root out the true identity of the author—the search went global when the Neapolitan Quartet achieved bestselling success in over forty languages. There have been accusations that the novels were written by multiple people, or that they were secretly written by Domenico Starnone, an already very successful Italian novelist.

While many of these 'searches' have amounted to little more than speculation and brief attempts at comparing the style of Ferrante's writing to that of other writers, one investigation has gone the distance. In 2016, Claudio Gatti, an Italian journalist for *Il Sole 24 Ore*, published an extensive article chronicling his extended investigation into the identity of Ferrante (Gatti, 2016). The article was simultaneously published in news outlets in Germany and France, as well as in *The New York Review of Books* in the United States. The article, which claimed to have definitively uncovered Ferrante's true identity via financial records, was met with uproar from all sides. While some were fascinated by the possibility of finally knowing the writer behind Ferrante's novels, a majority of the responses were of disgust.

Reading Claudio Gatti's article feels like reading a police report on an escaped convict. Through a tangled web of property records and payments from Ferrante's publisher, Gatti exposes his guess at Ferrante's identity, Anita Raja, a translator for Edizione e/o, as if she is guilty of some crime committed against all of her readers for not wanting herself to be known. Journalists and readers around the world responded in force, most in support of Ferrante's desire to remain out of the public eye (Schwartz, 2016).

Ferrante's circumstances as a pseudonymous author may be relatively unusual in today's literary landscape, but her experiences throughout the entire ordeal of her 'unmasking' seem painfully typical—mirroring much of the same trials and discrimination experienced by the Elena of Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet. As Ferrante powerfully recounts in her book, *In the Margins*, she spent years of her early career working to navigate the Italian literary space, asking herself, "[f]or a woman who has something to say, does it really take a miracle—I said to myself—to dissolve the margins within which nature has enclosed her and show herself in

her own words to the world?” (Ferrante, 2022, p. 27).

History would certainly indicate that this is, unfortunately, the prevailing reality for Italian women writers. Stefania Lucamante contends in her book, *A Multitude of Women: The Challenge of the Contemporary Italian Novel*, that “female writers in Italy must be prepared for ‘misogynistic criticism’ if they do not conform to a given framework” (Schwartz, 2020). This appears to be resoundingly true in the cases of both the fictional and non-fictional experiences of women writers in Ferrante’s work.

This thread of similarity between the lived experience of the two Elenas has been a topic of focus for scholars, adding complexity and immediacy to the works themselves, especially from Ferrante’s unique position as an anonymous writer. As Italian literary scholar Olivia Santovetti writes in her article, “Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels”:

This overlapping between life and fiction is a complex issue. Paradoxically, the anonymity of Ferrante ensures that these differences between fiction and reality ... end up vanishing precisely because the position of distance or closeness of an anonymous writer is not assessable or measurable ... This overlapping of real life and fiction on the one hand mesmerizes the reader (de Rogatis believes that this ‘fantasia di memoir, che assimila tutta la scrittura di Elena Ferrante ad una continua estesa autobiografia’² constitutes one of the main reasons for Ferrante’s global success), while on the other, particularly in the Neapolitan Novels, it is constantly thematized, and drags the reader into reflection on a key issue of novel-writing. (Santovetti, 2018, p. 538)

This key issue of novel-writing is the most crucial overlapping between the two Elenas. Through the reception of Elena Greco’s books throughout the Neapolitan Quartet, we as readers begin to see the distinct parallels between Greco’s experience and the real-life reception of Ferrante’s work by the Italian literary establishment over the course of the last two decades. In both cases, we vividly see the discrimination faced by women writers in Italy, and the devaluing of their art that so often takes place in the insular politics of Italian literature. “The female pen, precisely because it is unexpected in the male tradition, has to make an enormous, courageous effort” (Ferrante, 2022, p. 27).

However, as Ferrante so vividly portrays these challenges throughout the Neapolitan Quartet, she is also, in the way in which she is writing the novels, demonstrating a powerful artistic choice, a choice to transcend the traditional spaces where these current realities most often play out: the live interview, the public reading, the awards event. In doing so, Ferrante is reasserting a notion that, while certainly previously proposed, has nonetheless been almost entirely abandoned in today’s public-figure-obsessed world: the irrelevancy of the author. By utilizing her anonymity in this way, she has been able to begin the process of reshaping the very spaces that have in the past proved most hostile. Ultimately, she is able to reengage with these spaces on her own terms: preserving her privacy and individual personhood and letting the work, more than anything, speak for itself.

While this does not mean that more writers should simply decide to remain anonymous, it is nevertheless crucial to observe the ways in which Ferrante has utilized this artistic

² De Rogatis’ quote roughly translates as: “memoir fantasy, which likens all of Elena Ferrante’s writing to a continuous extended autobiography”

choice to negotiate the Italian literary world. On the surface, it appears as if she has almost entirely removed herself from it, but under the surface she has simultaneously been shaping it, bringing about—intentionally or not—seismic shifts within the conventional boundaries of Italian literature.

4. “THE FERRANTE EFFECT”

In the mid-2010s, as the Neapolitan Quartet was gradually being translated, the term “Ferrante fever” was popularized to express the unique fervor that quickly built up around Ferrante’s work. Now, as we enter the mid-2020s, a new term is being proposed to capture the powerful literary movement rising up in Italy: “the Ferrante effect.”

In 2019, the *New York Times* published an article of the same title, announcing that “in Italy, women writers are ascendant” (Momigliano, 2019). Indeed, the last decade has seen a profusion of best-selling and award-winning works by writers like Veronica Raimo, Helena Janeczek, Donatella Di Pietrantonio, and Igiaba Scego. Their stories grapple with topics like traditional gender roles, marriage, and sexual assault; they position the experiences of women at the center of times of political conflict and upheaval; they explore the immense challenges of the immigrant experience in a country increasingly reluctant to receive them; they are bringing new stories and new perspectives—challenging not just the Italian literary establishment, but the politics upon which it is founded. What we are observing now is the rising of a new vanguard in Italian literature, one that is unafraid to interrogate unexplored corners and stories, to push back on a mode of storytelling that would write the world smaller, that would stay within the boundaries of the world as it is and as it has been.

While the individual brilliance of these authors is what is at work empowering this growing movement, Ferrante, in many ways, can be credited with providing its spark. As Igiaba Scego said in an interview with the *Times*, “There’s a global buzz about contemporary Italian writers, including many women and even minorities, and we owe a lot to her for that” (Momigliano, 2019). In these novels, we see ‘the political novel’ as not necessarily overt and obtuse, but like the Neapolitan Quartet, a profound portrait of female friendship wrapped in an incisive, tactful, resounding critique of the Italian political, and by extension literary, landscape and whose stories it deems worthy of telling. By helping initiate this growing movement, Ferrante and her Neapolitan Quartet have positioned themselves as nothing sort of politically transformative, even if their exact impact is more challenging to trace. However, by historically positioning the novels in the terms of 1970s Italian feminist movements, the political force of the novels becomes more legible. This is exactly the work literary scholar Emma Heaney is engaged with in her study of Ferrante’s work. Heaney writes:

[Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet] detail the messy and idiosyncratic ways that patriarchy and capital interact in the lives of the girls and women of one poor neighbourhood in Naples. This story works on the definition of militancy itself, revealing its practice in ‘the kitchen, the bedroom, and the home.’... *The Neapolitan Series* shows us that female survival will come through understanding of daily life passed from mother to daughter, from friend to friend, developed through individual, dyadic, and collective investigations of the self as not radically singular, but as historical. This is also the lesson of Italian Feminism... (Heaney, 2020, pp. 1313–1314)

The novel's constant centering of domestic and familial life as centers of political engagement is critical to understanding their broader political implications, particularly in the context of Italian society and culture. As Elena Greco remarks at one point in the novels, "daily life erupts like a slap." In exploring this thought further, Heaney writes in her conclusion that, "the novels repeatedly stage these 'slaps': moments when female characters recognise the violent effect of, not an extraordinary event, but the daily operations of their lives" (Heaney, 2020, p. 1328). It is, at least in part, the story of these daily operations that makes the Neapolitan Quartet so arresting. What unfolds before the reader is the story of a singular life, in so many ways unremarkable. And yet, embedded within Elena Greco's story and her lifelong friendship with Lila, is the story of a nation in the midst of a political tumult and transformation, a social structure changing before the character's very eyes.

In the irreverent and quietly world-shaping mode of Ferrante, a growing body of literature is rising up to tell the crucial stories of our time, stories that question, subvert, and destabilize a rising tide in Italy and globally that wants to stoke the flame of nationalism and anti-immigration and restrict the rights of women and minorities in the name of preserving 'traditional' values. Against this emergent far-right regime is this new vanguard in Italian literature. It is not a singular political force that changes the landscape, but a persistent voice, one that questions the way things are and the direction they are heading, that proposes new ways of being and seeing, that leaves the reader seeing things a little bit differently than before they began.

5. CONCLUSION

Literature does not craft policy and run political campaigns, rather, it exists and thrives in the intimate space between writer and reader. In subtle ways, it shapes the ways in which we see the world, the ways in which we interact with people and place. As Adele encourages Elena at one point in the novels, "Don't be timid. You're a writer, use your role, test it, make something of it. These are decisive times, everything is turning upside down. Participate, be present" (Ferrante, 2014, p. 183). To be brave, to be fully present, to write into the upheaval of the moment and simultaneously begin to shape that moment—that is the emergent power of women writers in Italy today. It is a recasting of Ferrante's concept of "smarginatura" for the coming decades; a "spilling through the established boundaries of conventional reality" and into new realms of narrative as a politically transformative act (De Rogatis, 2019, p. 87). The next generation of writers may not only spill through the historic boundaries between politics and art, between women writers and the Italian literary establishment, but dissolve these margins entirely, exploring entirely new narratives and modes of storytelling. It is this very experimentation that is one of the wonderful reasons why we look to literature. In Italy today, a new generation of writers has already begun this exploration, subtly shaping the contours of the world as we see it, and along with it, the Italy of the future.

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