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Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin

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# Playing with the Maternal Body: Violence, Mutilation, and the Emergence of the Female Subject in Ferrante's Novels

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

Sub-proletarian fights, domestic disputes, and *camorrista*-led aggression permeate and scar the suburban cityscape in Elena Ferrante's works. Violence and animosity, which dictate life in the Neapolitan *rioni*, are deeply entrenched in the local dialect, as well as in the writer's conflict-ridden portrayals of mothering and motherhood. This article proposes to analyze a fundamental tension that emerges in Ferrante's writings, which explore new notions of feminine identity and rethink fundamental aspects of gender relations and social constructs, most prominently of motherhood. These reflections, however, remain profoundly tinged by the patriarchal structures and spaces they set out to expose and subvert. A particularly productive way of approaching the tension that underpins Ferrante's textual negotiation of the feminine subject, is through a close reading of her complex depictions of maternity.

More precisely, this article will analyze the intricate interplay between forms of desire and the imagery of violence, conflict, repulsion, and animosity that accompanies maternity in *L'amore molesto* (1992), *La figlia oscura* (2006), and the so-called Neapolitan novels (2011–2014), with a specific focus on *L'amica geniale* (2011).<sup>1</sup> My reading will show how the maternal body—which appears as violating or violated in its inaccessibility, repulsive appearance, or crippled status—stands at the very center of the author's reflections on the troubled and discontinuous emergence of the female subject. Ultimately, I will show how Ferrante's complex female characters challenge normative conceptualizations of motherhood and femininity while exploring new forms of female-focused experience that undermine deeply engrained patriarchal power structures.

Critical appraisals of Ferrante often single out her unforgiving portrayals of maternity, which routinely challenge the socially and religiously constructed stereotype of the nurturing, self-abnegating, and asexual mother, as one of the most unsettling and thought-provoking aspects of her work. Kate Chisholm's article in *The Spectator*, for instance, refers to the “brutal honesty with which Ferrante is prepared to expose the dark underside of female friendship and motherhood.”<sup>2</sup> James Wood, on the other hand, draws attention to the “savagery with which the author attacks the themes of motherhood and womanhood,” as her texts stand apart in how they indulge in “the psychic surplus, the outrageousness” of the familial dramas they expose.<sup>3</sup> However, I will argue that rather than constituting an eccentric feature of the author's works, Ferrante's “disturbing” conceptualizations of motherhood—and their recurrent link to animosity and violence—stand in critical dialogue with a long-standing literary and cultural tradition that constructs non-normative forms of motherhood as deviant or aberrant.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet comprises four volumes published between 2011 and 2014 (these dates refer to the original Italian texts): *L'amica geniale* (2011), henceforth referred to as AG; *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), henceforth referred to as BF; *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012), henceforth referred to as SNC; *The Story of a New Name* (2013), henceforth referred to as SNN; *Storia di chi fugge e chi resta* (2013), henceforth referred to as SFR; *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014), henceforth referred to as TLS; *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014), henceforth referred to as SBP; *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), henceforth referred to as SLC.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Chisholm, “Why Elena Ferrante doesn't work on radio,” *The Spectator* (August 6, 2016), <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/08/why-elena-ferrante-doesnt-work-on-radio/> (accessed November 23, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> James Wood, “Women on the Verge: The Fiction of Elena Ferrante,” *New Yorker* (January 21, 2013), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/women-on-the-verge> (accessed November 22, 2016).

## Violated and Violating Mothers

Ferrante's novels foreground resistance to the mother's corporeality, while the maternal body is repeatedly "violated," both in its numerous physical shortcomings and as it emerges as a target of violence. At the same time, mothers are often depicted as figures that *exert* violence—less in the form of physical force than in emotional vehemence and destructive behavior. Alternatively, they appear as the agents of animosity and rage. In her work *Orrorismo, ovvero della violenza sull'inerme* (2007) [*Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, 2009], Adriana Cavarero introduces the term *horrorism*, a neologism that designates a form of violation that is rooted in the offense given by disfiguration and massacre. In particular, Cavarero's work addresses the poignancy of the association between the female and forms of violence and horror, which she contextualizes in the Western European cultural imaginary. Despite the fact that men historically remain the perpetrators and protagonists of all "theaters of violence" (2009, 14), she argues that in our cultural imagination "horror has the face of a woman," and it is in this association of the female with horror that "repugnance is heightened, and the effect is augmented" (2009, 14). Abhorrence is even further intensified when a woman's reproductive powers come into play, as for instance in the prominent classical figure Medea. It is in the image of a mother who commits the crime of infanticide, directed toward the vulnerable and helpless, that the icon of horror achieves a form of "atrocious perfection" (2009, 26). Medea stands out as doubly aberrant because she combines motherhood with violence.

Ferrante seizes upon the disruptive power of the cultural associations between the female gender and abhorrence/violence to question normative portrayals of femininity and, more specifically, of motherhood. The author thereby joins a lineage of feminist theorists who have revisited non-normative constructions of maternity in the disciplines of anthropology, psychoanalysis, and film studies, to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> These constructs include the figure of the "dangerous," "monstrous," or otherwise "subversive" mother, and accounts that position the maternal figure as the target of aggressive desires. Psychoanalysis, as Ferrante notes in a review of Alice Sebold's novel *The Almost Moon* (2007), has in fact reflected extensively on the ambiguous feelings that revolve around the mother figure. The author underlines Freud's contribution to this discourse (in the famous case study on "Dora"), but she mainly references Melanie Klein's work, which crucially posits the maternal body as "l'origine dei buoni e soprattutto dei cattivi sentimenti dell'animale umano" (the origin of both the good and, especially, the bad feelings of the human animal) ["Se l'amore è furioso"],<sup>5</sup> with "matricide" constituting one of the foundational stages of the individual's psychic development.

Equally central in this context and especially relevant to an analysis of the links between maternity and subject formation in Ferrante's oeuvre are the works of Julia Kristeva. The

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Douglas 1966; Kristeva 1980 [1982], 1986; Braidotti 1994; Ussher 2006. Another seminal study in this context is the film theorist Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), in which she adopts the Kristevan notion of abjection to analyse and rethink forms of female monstrosity—or the "monstrous-feminine," in an attempt to avoid construing them as simply the reversal of the male monster—in the genre of the horror film. Challenging the Freudian theory of sexual difference, Creed argues that the monstrous feminine rather than being a passive victim poses an active threat (as a castrator, rather than as castrated) to the patriarchal imaginary. In her analysis, Creed identifies five different typologies of the monstrous feminine in the horror film (the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman), the majority of which are the face of the reproductive woman as monstrous and threatening: "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive function" (7).

<sup>5</sup> For an English translation of the article by Ann Goldstein, see "Elena Ferrante on Alice Sebold's new novel, *The Almost Moon*," on the website of Europa Editions, <http://www.europaeditions.com/news/340/elena-ferrante-on-alice-sebold-s-new-novel-the-almost-moon> (accessed 15 December 2016): "Thanks to [Klein], today the mother's body is at the origin of both the good and, especially, the bad feelings of the human animal."

literary theorist and psychoanalyst has further developed Klein's notion of "matricide" as a fundamental passage in subject formation in light of Mary Douglas's findings in the field of anthropology. Kristeva closely links the maternal function with the abject—a notion that refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning, caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, self and other. This reaction is often provoked by the encounter with bodily waste and fluids, such as feces, urine, vomit, or tears (Kristeva 1982, 3), all forms of defilement that are reminders of our physical wasting and ultimate death, and thereby render the boundaries and limitations of our selfhood ambiguous. The association Kristeva establishes between abjection and motherhood principally lies in the process of subject formation. While becoming an autonomous subject requires breaking away from one's mother, amounting to a symbolic form of "matricide" (Kristeva 2001, 131),<sup>6</sup> the mother also remains a central point of reference, the object of desire and the target of the subject's first "mimetic yearnings" (Kristeva 1982, 32). As both the other that threatens the boundaries of the self and an intrinsic yet unstable part of the self that "guarantees my being as subject," the abject preserves an inherent ambiguity, with the mother appearing as both desirable and terrifying in the process: "The abject [...] is a violent, clumsy breaking away [from the maternal entity], with the constant risk of falling back under the power as securing as it is stifling" (13). The linkages between the process of individuation and the maternal figure, the contrasting feelings that afflict Ferrante's female protagonists as they attempt to negotiate a new form of subjectivity that is separate from the mother, as well as the author's textual constructions of the repulsive maternal body, can be productively interpreted in light of Kristeva's notion of abjection.

In her review of Sebald's novel, which deals with an emotionally neglectful, controlling mother who is eventually killed by her daughter, Ferrante laments the scarcity of literary portrayals of violent or violated mothers. She praises Sebald's textual focus on "l'intollerabile potenza distruttiva [del] legame [madre-figlia]" (the intolerable destructive power of [the mother-daughter] bond ["Se l'amore è furioso"]), a topic that is often silenced in our cultural narratives of maternity, and which Ferrante instead turns into one of the central concerns of her novels. While accounts of aberrant motherhood are certainly far from conventional, there are some noteworthy antecedents of the "deviant" mother in female-authored Italian literature that have potentially played a role in the conceptualization of Ferrante's maternal characters. These include Sibilla Aleramo's (1876–1960) *Una donna* (1906), whose protagonist decides to abandon her child in order to affirm her individual agency. Annie Vivanti's (1866–1942) *The Devourers* (1910) and *Circe* (1912) also deal with a "maternal order of deviance"<sup>7</sup> manifested in the former by the female protagonist's inability to define her subjectivity separate from the child, and in the latter by the protagonist Maria Tarnowska's struggle with mental illness, intoxication, and moral corruption. In the postwar period, Elsa Morante (1912–85) and Goliarda Sapienza (1924–96) similarly resist patriarchal power structures while redefining the role of the maternal. Motherhood is a constant, near-obsessive presence throughout Morante's works, with the split mother finding her most radical expression in the eponymous protagonist of her last novel, *Aracoeli* (1982). Ferrante has on various occasions acknowledged the central importance of Morante's works on her

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<sup>6</sup> See also "The Cult of the Mother or an Ode to Matricide?" (in Kristeva 2001, 114–36): "Without matricide the internal object cannot be formed, the fantasy cannot be constructed, and reparation, as well as the redirection of hostility into the introjection of the self, is foreclosed [...] In order to think, one must first lose the mother" (130).

<sup>7</sup> Anne Urbancic, "Monster Mothers: The Work of Annie Vivanti," paper delivered at the conference "Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil" at Oriel College, University of Oxford, 19–22 September 2010.

own literary production,<sup>8</sup> and it has been alleged that her pseudonym is modeled on the author's name in its phonetic resemblance. In Sapienza's autobiographically inspired works *Lettera aperta* (1967) and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969), on the other hand, the focus is on the intellectual, politically engaged mother, who constitutes a role model while simultaneously standing accused of neglecting her daughter in the affective sphere.

In her tales of "atrocious" and conflicted mothers, Ferrante hence taps into a cultural imaginary that has long dominated male-centered discourses of maternity, that only in recent times has been re-examined by feminist theorists of various disciplines (see note 4). Taking as a point of departure the link between motherhood and violence, animosity, and abhorrence, as theorized by Kristeva and Cavarero, Ferrante furthermore enters into dialogue with critics and authors who have explored more fluid notions of femininity and maternity through their engagement with non-normative portrayals of motherhood.

In the following discussion of the textual phenomenology of the violated/violating Ferrantian mother I will first focus on the dichotomy between desire and repulsion associated with the mother's physicality. I will then analyze the frustrated desire to possess the maternal body, resulting in an act of—often reciprocal—rejection; and finally, I will examine corporeal and conceptual forms of dissolution projected onto the textual portrayal of mothers/female characters, showing how Ferrante employs the latter to negotiate resistance to normative portrayals of maternity and femininity.

### **Ferrante's Maternal Figures: Between Desire and Repulsion**

In Ferrante's earlier works in particular, the mother-daughter relationship often vacillates between an intense form of desire and traits of violence and animosity in a dialectic that propels the narrative. In *La frantumaglia*, Ferrante openly confesses her interest in psychoanalytic and feminist theories of the mother-daughter relationship, and in particular the works of Luce Irigaray.<sup>9</sup> While she claims to be uncertain about the direct impact of feminist thought on her work, it is undeniable that her texts postulate a close relationship between the maternal body, the formation of the subject, and the early stages of language formation, all in line with the revaluation of the maternal function and the body in second-wave French feminist thought (including theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous). In fact, one might contend that the strong tactile, olfactory, and visual dimension of her texts also evoke parallels with Irigaray's notion of *écriture féminine*.<sup>10</sup>

The focus on the links between the maternal body and the emergence of language underpins Ferrante's discourse on dialect and its complex development throughout her works. Conventionally considered a vehicle of affect and authenticity,<sup>11</sup> the local dialect is closely associated with the body and with oral culture. In the author's early writings, in particular, the use of dialect signals the child's privileged access to the maternal body in early infancy.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, *La frantumaglia* (2003), 15–17, henceforth referred to as LF; *Fragments* (2016), 18–19, henceforth referred to as F.

<sup>9</sup> "How much those readings [Freud, Jung, Klein, Lacan, Irigaray] have influenced my books is a mystery to me [...] On the other hand, how to deny that *Troubling Love* comes in part from what, at the end of the eighties, I knew about the research and the debate on female childhood and on girls' attachment to the mother?" (F, 122) ["Quanto queste letture [Freud, Jung, Klein, Lacan, Irigaray] abbiano influito sui miei libri per me è un mistero [...] D'altra parte come negare che *L'amore molesto* viene anche da ciò che, a fine anni '80, sapevo della ricerca e del dibattito sull'infanzia femminile e sull'attaccamento delle bambine alla madre?" (LF, 157)].

<sup>10</sup> See also Wood 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Other studies on the dichotomy emerging between dialect and standardized Italian in Ferrante's works include Benedetti 2012, which focuses on *L'amica geniale*, and Lucamante 2008, which discusses mainly *I giorni dell'abbandono* (*The Days of Abandonment*). See also Katrin Wehling-Giorgi 2016 for a comparative reading of the notion of the mother tongue in Ferrante and Goliarda Sapienza.

The young Delia posits Neapolitan as “la lingua di mia madre” (*L’amore molesto*, 21; “the language of my mother”),<sup>12</sup> and she directly links the maternal sphere with a preliminary stage of language acquisition. In a similar vein, Leda in *La figlia oscura* is enchanted as she listens to the young mother Nina speaking to her daughter “con una cadenza dialettale gradevole, il napoletano che amo, quello tenero del gioco e delle dolcezze” (*La figlia oscura*, 18; “the pleasing cadence of the Neapolitan dialect that I love, the tender language of playfulness and sweet nothings,” *The Lost Daughter*, 19).<sup>13</sup>

Despite these positive connotations of the mother tongue, there is a distinctly violent undertone in the local dialect, which Ferrante’s female characters increasingly perceive as a vehicle for the expression of the masculine power to which they were subjected in early childhood. Ultimately, dialect comes to play a crucial part in the protagonists’ desires to break with the past as they process their violent upbringing. As Delia puts it in *L’amore molesto*, her native language echoes the violent fights witnessed in her childhood. The sheer anxiety it evokes and the memories associated with it fuel Delia’s intention to turn her back on her native language following the death of her mother (AM, 20–21; TL, 21).<sup>14</sup> This proves to be easier said than done, as Ferrante’s characters encounter firm resistance when trying to leave their mother tongue behind. On the one hand, the violent language of their childhoods provokes disgust in them, and they resolve to safely relegate it to the past. On the other, they acknowledge a profoundly visceral connection with Naples and its dialect (see e.g., FO, 26; LD, 26). Leda, the protagonist of *La figlia oscura*, reluctantly acknowledges the lasting influence of her southern origins when confronted with the Neapolitan family she encounters on the beach: “Non li tolleravo e tuttavia mi tenevano stretta, li avevo tutti dentro” (FO, 92; “I couldn’t bear them and yet they held me tight, I had them all inside me,” LD, 78). Similarly, Elena (also Lenuccia, or Lenù in the narrative), the young protagonist of *L’amica geniale*, concedes that the obscene and violent *camorrista* language she so despises is, after all, her own: “La loro lingua violenta era la mia” (AG, 316).<sup>15</sup> The native Neapolitan dialect from her childhood has become part of her innermost being to the point of having formed the basis of the fears and anxieties that have accompanied her all her life (AG, 29; BF, 33).

The transition from an infantile form of desire to the hostility evoked by the maternal tongue accompanies a strong sense of repulsion that Ferrante’s protagonists associate with the maternal body at subsequent stages of their development. The emphasis on the contrasting feelings towards the mother, as well as on the close links between the maternal sphere and language formation, once again invite a Kristevan reading. The theorist’s notion of abjection signals both the subject’s psychic severance from the maternal figure and the passage from the preverbal (or the semiotic) to the symbolic, the realm of structured language and social order. The maternal body is hence reconstructed as abject with the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order; yet, according to Kristeva, there remains a libidinal attachment to the maternal, to whom the self was once linked through a primary projective identification, which often resurfaces in speech. Poetic language, including rhythm, assonance, sound play, and repetition, provide the possibility to recover the maternal body, with the semiotic realm on occasions irrupting into the symbolic order (Kristeva 1984, 79–80). This process of abjection retains an ambiguity that is reminiscent of the complex mother-

<sup>12</sup> *Troubling Love* (2006), 21, henceforth referred to as TL. See also TL, 130; *L’amore molesto* (1992), 165, henceforth referred to as AM.

<sup>13</sup> *La figlia oscura* (2006), henceforth referred to as FO; *The Lost Daughter* (2008), henceforth referred to as LD.

<sup>14</sup> For a further discussion of the tensions emerging from the contrast between dialect and Italian, see also Milkova 2013, 104, and Benedetti 2012.

<sup>15</sup> “Their violent language was mine” (BF, 319).

daughter relationships we encounter in Ferrante's texts: in her position at the threshold of selfhood and language, the mother emerges as simultaneously desired and rejected.

As Stiliana Milkova has convincingly shown with specific reference to *La figlia oscura*, one of the strategies that Ferrante employs to challenge normative experiences of motherhood and femininity is the phenomenology of disgust. *La figlia oscura* is dominated by an "aesthetics of disgust" (Milkova 2013, 94), much of which is narratively filtered through the central figure of a doll, which assumes the functions of both mother and daughter in Ferrante's texts. Revulsion toward the maternal body is also present, *in nuce*, in the earlier novel *L'amore molesto*. In fact, Delia's journey of discovery of her mother's past is strewn with numerous episodes of sickness and vomiting, as well as the secretion of bodily fluids in the form of the menstruating female body and semen.<sup>16</sup>

An explicit focus on the maternal body as an abject source of pleasure and disgust occurs in the scene where Amalia invites Delia to touch her "ventre bianco e gonfio" ["flabby white stomach"] with its "carne molle [e] la pancia cascante" ["her soft flesh, her sagging belly"]. To this the daughter reacts with repulsion, only wishing her mother to cover up (AM, 24–25; TL, 24). Even more strikingly, Delia's encounter with the mother's corpse, in Kristevan terms "the utmost [form] of abjection" (Kristeva 1982, 4), arouses a profound sense of uneasiness that once again plays on the unsettling coexistence of repulsion and erotic pleasure: the abhorrence of Amalia's dead body, described as an "oggetto livido" ("livid object"), is heightened by its association with eroticizing imagery, including a lacy bra revealing the nipples and the olive-skinned legs which appear extraordinarily youthful (AM, 11–12; TL, 14–15). The desire directed towards the mother in Delia's early childhood has here been transformed into a disturbing image that merges eroticism and death.

*L'amore molesto* and *La figlia oscura* preserve a degree of ambiguity towards the maternal figure that is articulated in the dual discourses of desire and disgust.<sup>17</sup> The repugnance towards the *genetrix*, however, assumes a more radical stance in the Neapolitan quartet, where the mother-daughter relationship is dominated by a form of outright hatred and rejection that leads Elena to distance herself from her mother's lineage: "io odiavo mia madre, e la odiavo davvero, profondamente" (AG, 65; "I hated my mother, really hated her, profoundly," BF, 69).<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the protagonist's loathing is often associated with her contempt for her mother's clumsy, vulgar, and ungrammatical use of Italian, which is contrasted with the aspirational figure Maestra Oliveira and her erudite employment of language.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Signora Greco's perceived failings at a linguistic level—which also point to a deep-seated sense of class shame that afflicts the protagonist at various stages of her life<sup>20</sup>—are metonymically mirrored in her "figura storta" (AG, 89; "misshapen figure," BF, 93). Elena's intense hatred for her mother, which seems to ease only in old age (SBP,

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<sup>16</sup> See Milkova 2013, 93 for a discussion of bodily fluids and the breakdown of boundaries in *L'amore molesto*.

<sup>17</sup> In Ferrante's writings, the phenomena of disgust and dissolution often closely accompany and indeed disrupt the associations with the maternal. In *La figlia oscura*, the troubled experience of motherhood is furthermore described as a state of "scombussolamento" ["turmoil"], "vertigine" ["vertigo"], or "nausea" ["nausea"] in which Nina recognizes her conflicted feelings: "È vero, ti si sfrantuma il cuore: non riesci a sopportare di stare insieme a te stessa e hai certi pensieri che non puoi dire" (FO, 127; "It's true, your heart shatters: you can't bear staying together with yourself, and you have certain thoughts you can't say," LD, 106). And the link between existential malaise and a permanent sense of nausea is also made in the Neapolitan novels, where it arises at the very moment of metaphorical severance from the maternal figure (AG, 53; BF, 57).

<sup>18</sup> See also Benedetti 2012, 176.

<sup>19</sup> See AG, 89; BF, 93. See also AG, 101: "Disse in dialetto, col suo solito tono scabro [...]. Era sempre la stessa: i capelli scialbi, l'occhio ballerino, il naso grosso, il corpo pesante" ("She said in dialect, in her usual harsh tone [...] She was the same: lusterless hair, wandering eye, large nose, heavy body," BF, 104–105).

<sup>20</sup> See Maksimowicz 2016 for a detailed discussion of class shame in the Neapolitan novels.

206; SLC, 221), is once again translated into a physical aversion projected onto the maternal body and its numerous flaws.

### The Neglectful/Inaccessible Mother

Paradoxically, the mother-daughter relationship in Ferrante's texts is also often characterized by a sense of maternal absence or unavailability, resulting in a profound fear of abandonment or emotional neglect. In *La figlia oscura*, the encounter with a large Neapolitan family on the beach triggers Leda's childhood memories of past summers spent at the seaside, evoking both the troubled relationship with her own mother and her personal experience of mothering. The hostile emotions she harbors against her parent often resurface as she recalls the early feelings of rejection from her mother, who experienced maternity as a source of discontent and frustration:

Mia madre si era sempre concessa pochissimo ai giochi che cercavo di fare col suo corpo. Si innervosiva subito, non le piaceva fare la bambola. Rideva, si sottraeva, si arrabbiava [...] Da grande ho cercato di tenere bene a mente la sofferenza di non poter maneggiare i capelli, il viso, il corpo di mia madre. (FO, 47)

[My mother had rarely yielded to the games I tried to play with her body. She immediately got nervous, she didn't like being the doll. [...] As an adult I tried to keep in mind the misery of not being able to handle the hair, the face, the body of my mother.] (LD, 42)

Leda's failure to conquer her mother's love is here articulated as her restricted access to the maternal body, which is once again construed as the object of desire. The mother's refusal to let her play with it bespeaks a lack of commitment to motherhood that remains deeply ingrained in the daughter's psyche and comes to haunt her own experience as a parent. Furthermore, the direct association between her mother and a "bambola" in this passage links Leda's abduction of a doll, Nani—which constitutes the center of the narrative plotline—with her desire to take ownership of the elusive maternal body.

The recurring trope of the doll, which is central to the tetralogy as a whole, catalyzes some of the more complex reflections on filial relationships, with the toy often acting as "the composite body of all Ferrante's Neapolitan mothers and daughters" (Milkova 2013, 98) in its conflation of different roles. Another significant dimension of the narrative device of the doll, which recurs on several occasions, is the notion of loss. In both *La figlia oscura* and the Neapolitan novels, the toy is linked to the emotional loss of the mother, with one specific episode arguably re-enacting the separation from the maternal figure. In a rare positive reference to Signora Greco, Elena's doll Tina is described as wearing "un vestitino blu che le aveva cucito mia madre in un raro momento felice" (AG, 26; "a blue dress that [her] mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness," BF, 30),<sup>21</sup> with the sartorial reference establishing a direct link between the toy and the parent. When Elena subsequently entrusts her childhood friend Lila with her doll, Lila throws it into a dark cellar, suggesting a metaphorical severance of the bond between mother and daughter. The abrupt separation from the adored toy has a devastating effect on the protagonist, who is left "come strozzata da due sofferenze, una già in atto, la perdita della bambola, e una possibile, la perdita di Lila"

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<sup>21</sup> The reference to her mother's dressmaking also suggests a parallel with Amalia, Delia's mother in *L'amore molesto*, who is a professional seamstress.



(AG, 50; “I was as if strangled by two agonies, one already happening, the loss of the doll, and one possible, the loss of Lila,” BF, 54).

The loss projected onto the doll in Ferrante’s works seems to suggest a re-enactment of the painful separation from the mother—perhaps in an attempt to master it, or indeed to replace the maternal figure with her close friend Lila—that leaves a profound fracture in the protagonist. As Emma Van Ness argues, the rejection of the dolls can be read as an “antimaternal” act through which Lila actively breaks the cycle of domesticity and passive femininity into which girls, according to Simone de Beauvoir, are often initiated through role-play with dolls.<sup>22</sup> The opening scene of *L’amica geniale* is reminiscent of the Freudian *fort-da game* in which the young boy repeatedly experiences the disappearance (“*fort*”; gone) and return (“*da*”; there) of the lost object in an attempt to overcome the absence of the mother. However, by having Lila push the doll into the dark cellar and subsequently abandon it, Ferrante’s narrative rejects the return and hence the reacquisition of the maternal figure. This, in turn, “creates the possibility for the girls to reevaluate motherhood” and to initiate a “larger game of limit-testing and boundary-breaking” (Van Ness 2016, 298), which repeatedly sees Lila as the agent of subversion throughout the Neapolitan saga.<sup>23</sup>

The lost object also significantly triggers the first in a long series of identity crises that see Elena experiencing a form of spatial and physical loss of contours, a lasting sense of malaise (AG, 53; BF, 57) that affects the very cohesive boundaries of her body:

Fui presa da una sorta di disfunzione tattile, certe volte avevo l’impressione che [...] le superfici solide mi diventassero molli sotto le dita o si gonfiassero lasciando spazi vuoti tra la loro massa interna e la sfoglia di superficie. Mi sembrò che lo stesso mio corpo, a tastarlo, risultasse tumefatto. (AG, 53)

[I was overcome by a kind of tactile dysfunction; sometimes I had the impression that [...] solid surfaces turned soft under my fingers or swelled up, leaving empty spaces between their internal mass and the surface skin. It seemed to me that my own body, if you touched it, was distended.] (BF, 57)

The associations between the doll and the notion of loss are further reinforced by the fact that Lila gives her daughter—who disappears in the last volume of the Neapolitan novels—the same name as Elena’s doll, Tina (SBP, 203; SLC, 218). And the final, mysterious reappearance of the dolls, which seem to act as placeholders in the various dynamics of reversal, doubling, and mirroring that accompany the two women’s often duplicitous friendship (SBP, 429; SLC, 451), coincides with Lila’s disappearance (SBP, 450–51; SLC, 472–73).

While Elena’s experience in this passage clearly foreshadows an existential loss of definition (“*smarginatura*,” or “the loss of margins”) whose links with the maternal will be discussed below, the notions of separation and loss are often accompanied and indeed intensified by imagery of rage and violence in Ferrante’s novels. In *La figlia oscura*, Leda’s feelings of maternal rejection are further reinforced by her mother’s ferocious behavior, which the protagonist attributes to long-held resentment against society’s demands on motherhood:

[Mia madre] si infuriava ancora di più, mi strattonava, mi copriva dalla testa ai piedi con un asciugamano strofinandomi con un’energia, una violenza tale,

<sup>22</sup> See Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), quoted in Van Ness 2016, 296–97.

<sup>23</sup> See Van Ness 2016 for an interesting reading of *L’amica geniale*’s opening episode as the girls’ refusal of traditional conceptualizations of maternity.

che non capivo se fosse davvero preoccupazione per la mia salute o rabbia covata a lungo, una ferocia che mi scorticava la pelle. (FO, 38)

[[My mother] became even more furious, yanked me, covered me from head to toe with a towel, rubbed me with such an energy, such violence that I didn't know if it was really worry for my health or a long-fostered rage, a ferocity, that chafed my skin.] (LD, 35)

The emotional cruelty attributed to her parent is, on many occasions, expressed at a linguistic level. In fact, Leda describes how her mother's well-rehearsed social mask frequently cracks, leading her to revert to the language of violence that dominates her social milieu (FO, 24; LD, 24). While Leda wishes to avoid growing up to be like her mother (FO, 24; LD, 24), she ends up experiencing a similar, if not more vehement, form of rejection toward her unborn daughter during her second pregnancy. As I shall further explore below, this act of repulsion is filtered through the (maternal) body.

In *L'amore molesto*, a young Delia is haunted by the constant fear of losing her mother (AM 162; TL, 127), an instinct that is on several occasions expressed through the impossibility of possessing the maternal body. Amalia is perceived as out of reach, ungraspable.<sup>24</sup> Far from the stereotype of the nurturing parent, she has a non-committal style of mothering, which leaves her daughter in a constant state of fear. Delia's frustrated desire to re-establish a symbiotic bond with the mother is eventually translated into an aggressive, violent impulse directed towards her. In fact, the daughter's wish to lick and suck her mother's finger ultimately transforms into the desire to bite it off, and hence to mutilate the maternal body in order finally to lay claim to it: "C'era stato un tempo in cui mi ero immaginata di staccarle quel dito eccezionale [...] Ciò che di lei non mi era stato concesso volevo cancellarglielo dal corpo" (AM, 78; "There had been a time when I imagined biting off that distinctive finger [...] Anything in her that had not been conceded to me I wanted to eliminate from her body," TL, 64). Read in a psychoanalytic key, the daughter's desire to bite off her mother's finger might also be interpreted as a metaphorical attempt at castration, or as a rebellion against the phallic and therefore the patriarchal system. In fact, the possessive demands on the maternal body provide further evidence of how Delia has internalized the violent patriarchal power structures of her childhood that see women, and mothers in particular, as objectified and dismembered in a number of ways.

### Physical Disintegration of the Maternal Body

Another trope that consistently accompanies Ferrante's maternal characters is a form of physical disintegration that is conceptually mirrored in the notion of "frantumaglia" (a form of fragmentation), a state of existential unease and a sense of disintegration that affects both mothers and daughters.<sup>25</sup> While literary associations between the crippled body and the

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<sup>24</sup> In *L'amore molesto*, for instance, Amalia's sexualized maternal body appears not only as "dangerous" and "culpable," but is also described as lacking contours, as uncontrollable, dissolving, swelling, dilating amongst the male gazes that seek to control her (AM, 63; TL, 53).

<sup>25</sup> The thematic focus on disintegration, of which the violated, repulsive, or uncontrollable maternal body constitutes one of the central tropes, is in fact highlighted in the key terminology Ferrante introduces in her later works, namely "frantumaglia" and "smarginatura": both these expressions—which are often closely linked to the notion of maternity—become metaphors for a sense of anxiety and dissolution that accompanies her female protagonists. See F, 100: "The frantumaglia is an unstable landscape, an infinite aerial or aquatic mass of debris that appears to the I, brutally as the true and unique inner self"; "La frantumaglia è un paesaggio instabile, una massa aerea o acquatica di rottami all'infinito che si mostra all'io, brutalmente, come la sua vera e unica interiorità" (LF, 125).

disintegration of the subject are not without precedents, what sets Ferrante's work apart is how she renegotiates the link between dismemberment and femininity to narrate new forms of female subjectivity that resist the male-dominated power structures they were formerly subjected to.

Cavarero discusses physical mutilation with reference to the Greek mythological figure of Medusa, who evokes a form of horror that is objectified in her bodily fragmentation, in particular her severed head. Medusa was violently subsumed into a patriarchal regime with her rape by Poseidon, for which she was punished by Athena (for the desecration of her temple) who turned her long hair into snakes while giving her the destructive power to turn anyone who looked directly at her into stone. Ultimately, Medusa was beheaded by Perseus. While linking *horrorism* to both the female gender and the gaze, Cavarero construes the horror evoked by the Gorgon as rooted in the beheaded Medusa's offense to the singularity of the human body (a form of "ontological violence"; Cavarero 2009, 28) and, by inference, of the human subject. Ferrante's adoption and handling of forms of mutilation that affect the feminine body similarly negotiate the emergence of the (female) subject in patriarchal society. Moreover, by focusing and reconstituting these bodies through the *female* narrator's lens, she foregrounds a form of agency in the female subject that is lacking in male-authored cultural narratives of female fragmentation. As Milkova has argued with reference to the visual portrayals of the female body in *L'amore molesto*, Ferrante not only subverts but also "[reconfigures] the male gaze into a new system" of visual representation that relies on "feminine origin [and] creativity."<sup>26</sup> As I argue in this article, this act of refocusing equally shapes the author's textual portrayals of the violated female body, which are particularly poignant and powerful when affecting the maternal figure. Ferrante's female bodies are not subsumed or defined by the patriarchal gaze, but rather provide a new narrative of resistance, of which Elena's authorship in the Neapolitan quartet remains one of the most potent testimonies.

One of the first fractured depictions of the female body occurs in *L'amore molesto*. As pointed out by Milkova (2016, 7), the text includes various visual metaphors—mainly in the form of paintings—that graphically narrate the violence inflicted on women. One of the paintings in question, an image of two women running openmouthed (AM, 66; TL, 55), was first exhibited in the Vossi shop window when Delia was a child (with the lingerie store itself clearly hinting at the sexualization of the female body), and later she rediscovers it in her father's flat. In what might be interpreted as a visual representation of the commodification of the female body and the violence inflicted on it by patriarchal society, the image reveals various severed or mutilated female body parts: "Le due donne urlanti dai profili che quasi combaciavano—slanciate da destra verso sinistra in un movimento mutilato di mani, di piedi, di parti delle teste, come se la tavola non fosse riuscita a contenerle o fosse stata ottusamente segata" (AM, 149; "The two shouting women whose profiles almost coincided—hurled from right to left in a mutilated movement of hands, feet, part of the head, as if the table had been unable to contain them or had been bluntly sawed off," TL, 117–18).

An even more striking image of bodily fragmentation emerges in Lila's self-mutilated photo panel/collage portraying her as a young spouse in her wedding dress, which adorns the Solara shop in *Storia del nuovo cognome*, the second novel of the tetralogy. Interestingly, it is precisely during Lila's first pregnancy—which gives rise to a moment of crisis—that, together with Elena, she powerfully manipulates the photo into a collage-style picture of disfigured and truncated body parts in which the bride's body appears "crudelmente trinciato" (SNC, 119).<sup>27</sup> In a proleptic anticipation of her later disappearance/self-cancellation

<sup>26</sup> Milkova 2016, 1. See Milkova 2016 for a detailed and fascinating reading of Ferrante's use of the visual arts in reconfiguring the male gaze in *L'amore molesto*.

<sup>27</sup> "Cruelly shredded" (SNN, 119).

in the final book of the series, Lila here realizes her own self-destruction *in an image*, as the narrator notes:

Con i cartoncini neri, coi cerchi verdi e violacei che Lila tracciava intorno a certe parti del suo corpo, con le linee rosso sangue con cui si trinciava e diceva di trinciarla, realizzò la propria autodistruzione *in immagine*. (SNC, 122; emphasis in original)

[With the black paper, with the green and purple circles that Lila drew around certain parts of her body, with the blood-red lines with which she sliced and said she was slicing it, she completed her own self-destruction *in an image*.] (SNN, 122–23).

The mutilated photo stands as one of the Neapolitan novels' central visual metaphors of defiance against the colonization of the female body. Interestingly, resistance is here articulated in a metaphor of creation and self-mutilation or even self-cancellation. The joint creative process ("il gioco dell'invenzione affiatata," SNC, 122; "the play of shared creation," SNN, 122) is clearly reminiscent of the act of writing and the agency that comes with authorship. In fact, self-mutilation appears to stand as a form of reclaiming agency in Ferrante's novels, a way of appropriating conventional constructs of the female body as not only lack or absence, but *formlessness*.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, by deliberately fragmenting and recomposing the photographic image of Lila as a teenage bride, the two young women reappropriate the power that is associated with the photographic gaze and, by extension, with the portrayal of the feminine body. For, as Marianne Hirsch claims, "to photograph is to *appropriate* the thing photographed. It means putting oneself in a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like *power*" (Hirsch 1997, 4; emphasis mine). By placing the female narrator in the active position of looking, or of renegotiating her own "*to-be-looked-at-ness*," to borrow the film theorist Laura Mulvey's term (Mulvey 1975, 11), the process of writing becomes a form of empowerment.

As we can see in a further example, it is precisely in combination with motherhood that bodily deformation achieves its full force. Mothers and mothers-to-be (pregnant bodies) are mercilessly desecrated by disease, dislocation, and disgust in Ferrante's texts. Leda experiences such unease throughout her second pregnancy. While attempting to be a good mother and intent on enjoying her period of gestation, she finds her own body rebelling against the "invasion" of the growing fetus, and she subsequently neglects her maternal duties:

Ma poi venne Marta. Fu lei ad aggredire il mio corpo costringendolo a rivoltarsi senza controllo [...] Il mio organismo diventò un liquore sanguigno, con una feccia poltigliosa in sospensione dentro cui cresceva un polipo violento, così lontano da ogni umanità da ridurmi, pur di nutrirsi di lui ed espandersi, a una putrilagine senza più vita. (FO, 131–32)

[[Marta] attacked my body, forcing it to turn on itself, out of control [...] My body became a bloody liquid; suspended in it was a mushy sediment inside which grew a violent polyp, so far from anything human that it reduced me, even though it fed and grew, to rotting matter without life.] (LD, 110)

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Grosz 1993, 203: "in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but [...] as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; a formless flow [...] as lacking [...] self-containment [...] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order."

The disruption of the symbiotic mother-child bond is further articulated in Leda's refusal to breastfeed her second daughter, yet another act of rejection that issues directly from her body: "Volevo essere una buona madre, una madre ineccepibile, ma *il corpo si rifiutava*" (FO, 117 [emphasis mine]; "I wanted to be a good mother, an exemplary mother, but *my body refused*," LD, 98).<sup>29</sup> The metaphor of the unborn baby besieging the maternal body is just one of the forms of dissolution brought about by maternity, a trope that persistently inhabits Ferrante's fictional landscape.

Perhaps the most striking case of corporeal undoing is the physical crippling of Elena's mother, Signora Greco, in the Neapolitan quartet. With her face disfigured by a lazy eye, and her right leg mutilated, the maternal figure acts as a source of outright repulsion, with her limp becoming a metaphor for the generation of "mute" women that the daughter endeavors to distance herself from. The intense hatred for her mother is repeatedly translated into a physical aversion projected onto the shortcomings of the maternal body:

Mi repelleva il suo corpo, cosa che probabilmente intuiva. [...] Era biondastra, pupille azzurre, opulenta. Ma aveva l'occhio destro che non si sapeva mai da che parte guardasse. E anche la gamba destra non le funzionava, la chiamava la gamba offesa. (AG 40)

[Her body repulsed me, something that she probably intuited. She was dark blonde, blue-eyed, voluptuous. But you never knew where her right eye was looking. Nor did her right leg work properly. She called it her damaged leg. She limped, and her step agitated me.] (BF, 44–45)

As Laura Benedetti has pointed out, one of the novel's "central metaphors" (Benedetti 2012, 177) lies in the contrast between Lila's physical agility (AG, 42; BF, 46)<sup>30</sup> and Signora Greco's near-immobility. Elena's desire for a definitive separation from her mother, the previous lineage of women and the troubled forms of selfhood they have come to represent, is in fact expressed through the narrative imagery of mobility: the protagonist actively seeks to turn away from her mother's limping gait to turn towards Lila's liberating, nimble pace:

Qualcosa mi convinse, allora, che se fossi andata sempre dietro a lei, alla sua andatura, il passo di mia madre, che mi era entrato nel cervello e non se ne usciva più, avrebbe smesso di minacciarmi. (AG, 42)

[Something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with [Lila], at her pace, my mother's limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn't come out, would stop threatening me.] (BF, 46)

The protagonist's choice to follow her friend and distance herself from the "threat" emanating from her mother is foreshadowed in the episode in which Lila callously throws her doll into the basement. When Elena is confronted with the agonizing choice of losing either Tina (the doll) or her friend, she makes the clear decision to abandon the toy to follow Lila instead (AG, 52; BF, 56). Lila dictates the pace of Elena's escape, and she emerges as the driving force behind her friend's distancing process from a maternal bond that chains her to the rigid rules of the *rione*. In fact, when turning her back on the *rione* for the first time on

<sup>29</sup> The autobiographically inspired narrator of Sapienza's *Il filo di mezzogiorno* similarly articulates her feelings of rejection by referring to her mother's refusal to breastfeed her (see Sapienza 1969, 67).

<sup>30</sup> "Lila [...] had slender, agile legs, and was always moving them" (BF, 46).

her summer trip to Ischia, it is both the peripheral cityscape and the (disproportionately large) maternal body that she leaves behind: “Per la prima volta andavo via da casa, facevo un viaggio, un viaggio per mare. Il corpo largo di mia madre—insieme al rione, alla vicenda di Lila—si allontanò, sempre più, si perse” (AG, 204; “For the first time I was leaving home [...] The large body of my mother—along with the neighborhood, and Lila’s troubles—grew distant, and vanished,” BF, 209).<sup>31</sup>

Despite her best intentions and Lila’s guidance, however, the protagonist continues to be pursued by the maternal figure, who resurfaces at key stages of her life. As Elena grows into adulthood, the initial feeling of disgust develops into a veritable threat emanating from her mother’s lame body (SNC, 101; SNN, 102). Signora Greco continues to haunt Elena, most prominently in pregnancy, when she reluctantly starts limping like her mother. As some of the familiar flaws emerge in her own body, the protagonist fears that her parent has infiltrated her (SFR, 213; TLS, 237).

The feeling of being relentlessly haunted by the mother is inextricably linked to central moments of subject formation in Ferrante’s work, the protagonist desperately trying to abject the maternal presence throughout her adult life. Arguably, it is only through the self-conscious process of writing—which provides her with an opportunity to externalize the struggle and give it a new form and agency—that Elena finally succeeds in leaving the mother behind, paving the path to a new conceptualization of the female subject.

## Conclusion

Coming back to Cavarero’s notion of *horrorism*, one might argue that the instances of physical dismemberment or dissolution affecting the maternal/feminine body in Ferrante’s works reflect an ontological sense of fragmentation. In fact, the author’s frequent recourse to the conflict-ridden mother-daughter bond provides a way to thematize an existential unease that is articulated in the various forms of dissolution that populate the author’s texts, and which seem to encapsulate a form of liminality that is specific to a female-focused experience. However, Ferrante’s narrative of dissolution does not simply reproduce the formlessness or subsumption that has dominated male-centered representations of the female body. On the contrary, her female-authored stories reframe and renegotiate the position of the feminine subject in patriarchal society from the perspective of a newly gained agency and creative power that resist patriarchal appropriations of the female body.

In fact, by establishing a close link between maternity and the forms of violence, disintegration, or emotional neglect that come to characterize the mother-daughter relationships in her texts, Ferrante seizes the subversive power of this association to problematize conventionally accepted forms of maternity, femininity, and gender constructs, and ultimately to reconfigure their role within a society that remains to a large extent dominated by men. The tensions that afflict her female characters, who are often caught between challenging and reproducing some of the basic tenets of patriarchally dominated society, are highly productive insofar as they challenge and revitalize discourses around conventionally accepted forms of maternity, femininity, and female subjectivity. The violated maternal/female body emerges as a “site of contestation” (Grosz 1993, 19) in Ferrante’s oeuvre, which metonymically reproduces the underlying conflicts concerning the development of the female subject throughout her texts. By abjecting male-focused conceptualizations of the female body, Ferrante is abjecting and rewriting a long cultural history of female submission in patriarchally oriented society.

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<sup>31</sup> Another passage in which Elena seems to establish a direct link between the maternal body and the *rione* is the following: “il suo occhio strabico pareva fatto apposta per individuare i movimenti segreti del rione” (AG, 55); [“her crossed eye seemed made purposely to identify the secret motives of the neighborhood” (BF, 59)].

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