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Ferrante and Feminism: Women Chasing Writing Leads to Friendship and Rivalryship

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FERRANTE AND FEMINISM

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Am I Elena or Lila?

I chose to analyze the role of feminism in Elena Ferrante's popular series the Neapolitan Quartet as the novels were my introduction to Italian culture and language. The summer before my junior year of high school, I visited my cousin in Naples where she was conducting research through Fulbright. She urged me to read the series before my arrival as they follow two protagonists named Elena and Lila as they grow up in Naples.

I fell in love with the books because I saw myself in both Elena, who works diligently to achieve her dream of being a published author, as well as Lila, whose curiosity drives her education long after leaving elementary school. The motifs of friendship, rivalry, and writing wove together in a satisfying but also unnerving experience which in some ways led me to enroll in *Elementary Italian* my freshman year and now write an Independent Study in the Italian Studies department at Connecticut College.

In writing this paper, my college career comes full circle as I analyze the third novel in the series, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, through the lens of second wave feminism to understand how *autocoscienza* manifests in the characters' relationship to writing. As I write, perhaps I will come to realize who I see myself as: Elena or Lila. Perhaps this question is irrelevant as comparing myself to them, I am competing with fictional characters as we all chase a similar dream.

Education for Girls and Women During the 1960s and 1970s in Naples

The majority of the Neapolitan Quartet, including *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, takes place in Naples from the 1950s through the 1970s. Ferrante describes in detail the adolescence of Lenuccia (Lenù/Elena) Greco and Raffaella (Lina/Lila) Cerullo as they grow up in a neighborhood controlled by the local Mafia. Although Ferrante's work is fictional, she accurately weaves Italian history into the text through the experiences of Elena and Lila. She describes Naples as a stagnant city that blocks access to primary and secondary education for women, especially young girls from low-income families such as Elena and Lila. However, the rise of radical feminism in Italy during the late 1960s and early 1970s altered the educational landscape for women.[1]

Although the third novel follows Elena and Lila when they are thirty-year-old women, the environment they grew up in directly impacts their current careers and relationships to writing. Education was a luxury for many children during these decades and only few were lucky enough to pursue advanced schooling at the university level, as Elena does in the second novel *The Story of a New Name*. She attends Liceo Classico Garibaldi, one of the first classical *lyceums* in Naples, and the only institution which admitted students from a working-class background.[2] Meanwhile, other children followed a similar path as Lila, who is forced to drop out of primary school to help support her family. The stagnancy in social change is one reason Elena, and other women, felt a desire to escape Naples. Unfortunately, this dream is a privilege that only some were able to pursue. While Elena is able to graduate from the University of Pisa and become a published author in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Lila remains in the grips of the very neighborhood Elena escapes. The educational backdrop of the novel is why Elena is introduced

[1] Ann, Mah. "Elena Ferrante's Naples, Then and Now," *The New York Times*, 2016.
[2] Sarah, Begley. "The Historical Truth Behind Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels," *Time*, 2015.

to feminist theory while Lila becomes involved in worker's unions, which spread across Italy during the same time period as the rise of second wave feminism.

There were structural transformations during these decades which led to more women being able to pursue a similar trajectory as Elena. A primary change was an increase in women's access to higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, a date just missed by Lila, and a simultaneous decline in fertility rates. In 1968, there were multiple laws passed which abolished the criminalization of adultery and in 1970, the Italian Parliament passed a law granting divorce after five years of separation. Five years later, the Parliament passed a new law that gave women an equal say in decisions regarding the welfare of their children, including those born out of wedlock.[3] Elena and Lila were born at the cusp of a decade which was marked by growing possibilities for Southern Italian girls from working class families.[4] In fact, these laws pertaining to divorce allow Lila to leave her abusive marriage and Elena to have an affair and ultimately divorce her husband. Despite a rising progressive Italian society, Ferrante does not romanticize their experiences but addresses the obstacles the women face when it comes to pursuing their education and writing.

The Rise of Second Wave Feminism in Italy: *Rivolta Femminile* and *Autocoscienza*

Those Who Leave and Those Who Leave takes place during the 1970s, a time period defined by the social movements that arose in Italy and changed the academic and colloquial conversation around gender roles, bringing together middle- and working-class activists.[5] Characteristic of this decade was the birth of second wave feminism and the Italian feminist collective *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt), who were based in Northern Italy and composed

[3] Karen, Bojar. *In Search of Elena Ferrante: The Novels and the Question of Authorship*, 2018, pg. 94.
[4] Ibid, pg. 95.
[5] Paola, Bono and Sandra, Kemp. *Italian Feminist Thought: A reader*, 1991, pg. 186.

of intellectuals who strived to establish a new feminist theory that drew inspiration from the American movement enfolding across the Atlantic Ocean at the same time.[6] In July 1970, the collective published their first manifesto which set the tone for the women's liberation movement in Italy. The manifesto states that "woman must not be defined in relation to man" and consequently rejects man as an authoritarian role. The perspective that equality subjects woman even further is not only the foundation for the Female Revolt and Italian second wave feminism, but also a theme which appears in Ferrante's novels. In addition to their radical manifesto, the Female Revolt opened their own publishing house, *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*, which became responsible for circulating ideas.[7] The house published prominent feminist thinker and former art critic Carla Lonzi's work, in addition to individual and collective accounts of *autocoscienza*. Together these texts and the publishing house exemplify the foundational presence of writing during the second wave of feminism. Even if Elena and Lila live in Southern Italy and do not explicitly engage with the Female Revolt or their publishing house, writing about their relationship to feminism is central to the plot and creation of the series.

In order to continue conversations pertaining to sexual difference and the rejection of man as superior to woman, small groups sprung up across Italy for women to analyze their experiences as women. These groups were called *gruppi di autocoscienza* (self-awareness groups) and were based on the consciousness-raising aspect of American feminism. Women had a space to talk without feeling invisible, as is so often the case when men are present. This designated space is especially important in the novels where the women are so often spoken over and down to by their male colleagues, husbands, brothers, and fathers. However, envy and

[6] Eva, Rus. "From New York Radical Feminists to Rivolta Femminile: Italian Feminists Rethink the Practice of Consciousness Raising, 1970-1974," 2005, pg. 188.
[7] Paola, Bono and Sandra, Kemp. *Italian Feminist Thought: A reader*, 1991, pg. 36.

aggressiveness also emerged among women, including the fictional characters of Elena and Lila.[8] According to Lonzi, *autocoscienza* stresses the importance of achieving self-directed awareness. She believed that the process is so introspective that it had to manifest through direct individual experience.[9] Lonzi's definition of *autocoscienza* suggests that a woman does not always need a group to understand herself and reach awareness, but a self-determined mindset can yield the same results. Even though Elena and Lila do not often partake in or enjoy traditional *gruppi di autocoscienza*, they both exhibit the independence and individual perseverance necessary to understand their positionality as women in the 1970s.

Feminist Thinker Carla Lonzi

The novels take place during the same decade during which Carla Lonzi, recognized as one of the founding mothers of Italian feminism, wrote on the topic of *autocoscienza*, sexual difference, and the shortcomings of gender equality. According to Claire Fontaine, Lonzi's writings "are sledgehammers for destroying the palace of culture than men build together higher and higher every day and for showing it for what it truly is: a fortress made only to exclude[10]." Her texts, specifically *Sputiamo su Hegel* (*Let's Spit on Hegel*) and *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (*The Clitoral and Vaginal Woman*), go beyond the boundaries of patriarchal theories and propose new radical thoughts on autonomy in societal structures and sexual pleasure.

Lonzi states in *Let's Spit on Hegel* that ideologies including Marxism and psychoanalysis have repressed women from adolescence to adulthood, the same temporal trajectory which Elena and Lila follow in the Neapolitan Quartet. While political philosopher Hegel believes "woman

[8] Ibid, pg. 82.
[9] Eva, Rus. "From New York Radical Feminists to Rivolta Femminile: Italian Feminists Rethink the Practice of Consciousness Raising, 1970-1974," 2005, pg. 189.
[10] Claire, Fontaine. "We Are All Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi's Legacy," 2013.

never goes beyond the stage of subjectivity," Lonzi states "woman is a complete individual. What must be changed is not the way she is, but the way she sees herself. We must transform the view which others, as well as ourselves, have of our place in the world.[11]" A woman's understanding of her place in the world derives from practices such as *autocoscienza*, writing, and education. In fact, access to education (or the lack thereof) directly impacts the opportunities a woman has, how the world comes to perceive her, and how she views herself. Of higher education, Lonzi believes "the university is not the place where she will achieve her liberation by means of culture, but the place where, after having been carefully prepared by the family, her repression will be completed.[12]" At this important moment in a woman's life, education grounded in theorists such as Hegel stunts a woman's growth and her perception of herself rather than be a means to dismantle her repression in society. It is patriarchal authority, in higher education and elsewhere, which continues to subject and force women to accept rather than reject this status as "inferior" as their own nature.[13] Elena is able to graduate with a university degree, but even during her years studying in Pisa she finds herself ostracized because of her gender and dialect. It is not until later in the series when she writes and reads on her own that she develops her feminist consciousness. Meanwhile Lila, who is not able to complete a traditional education as her friend, does not experience sexism in higher education, but instead confronts toxic masculinity in the workplace. Both women are able to reject these educational authorities: Elena through writing the books, Lila through disappearing from the very misogynist society which has for so long trapped her.

[11] Carla, Lonzi. "Let's Spit on Hegel."
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

The rejection of patriarchal authority also appears in *The Clitoral and Vaginal Woman* but is complicated by competition between women. In this text, Lonzi reappropriates the clitoris as the site of female autonomy. Lonzi explains that "when a woman acts as if her vagina were the *only* site of pleasure—when in fact it is the site of reproduction—her action merely reflects a male-orientated paradigm of pleasure" and is thus "complicit with the rules of patriarchy."[14] Unlike the passive, vaginal woman, the clitoral woman is a feminist who has entered a dimension of authenticity. However, the conflict between being a vaginal and clitoral woman can lead to competition and rivalry between women. In fact, Lonzi writes: "Women destroy each other, take away each other's strength, accuse each other, [and] end up being enemies."[15] Despite the possibility of aggression, Lonzi encourages women to write and expand beyond cramping theories which have for too long silenced their voices. Ferrante, as well as her fictional characters Elena and Lila, answer Lonzi's call-to-action and use writing to contribute their perspective to masculine disciplines from literature to computer programming.

Elena Ferrante: Consciousness-raising Under a Pseudonym

Although Lonzi passed away almost three decades before the publication of *My Brilliant Friend*, her legacy is passed down through the anonymous author Elena Ferrante who has established herself as a feminist thinker. The reader knows little about Ferrante's personal background, except that she grew up in Naples, has a degree in Classics (like Elena), and wrote a column for *The Guardian*. Ferrante stands by her belief that once a book is written, there is no need for its author—reminiscent of French theorist Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" which argues for the disconnection between a literary work and its writer. Some literary

[14] I Elena, Della Torre. "The Clitoris diaries: La donna clitoridean, feminine authenticity, and the phallic allegory of Carla Lonzi's radical feminism," 2014, pg. 223, 225.
[15] Ibid, pg. 226-227.

circles have tried to uncover her real identity and believe Rome-based translator Anita Raja and her novelist husband Domenico Starnone are behind the pseudonym. However, other readers believe this unmasking is violating as they believe readers should respect Ferrante's decision to remain anonymous.[16] Ferrante's anonymity is a feminist choice in itself as she associates herself and her work with women who write anonymously to avoid social biases against women authors.[17] She also elects a female name as her pseudonym rather than a male one which inverts the patriarchal mentality that demands a female author remain invisible.[18]

Although the reader does not know Ferrante's real identity, her voice is in no way invisible or silenced. Before the Neapolitan Quartet, Ferrante had already established herself as a talented author, but it is her column for *The Guardian* which indicates her perspective on feminism. In an article she writes: "Our defects, our cruelties, our crimes, our virtues, our pleasure, our very language are obediently inscribed in the hierarchies of the male, are punished or praised according to codes that don't really belong to us."[19] This constant grounding in a male dominant hierarchy, whether in the publishing world or a factory, is the setting of the Neapolitan Quartet. Not to mention, by writing a column for *The Guardian*—as well as the series—Ferrante engages in a similar consciousness-raising to her character, Elena, who is also a journalist, writer, and feminist.

In *Frantumaglia*, a collection of published letters and exchanges between Ferrante and others, she reveals her personal connection to second wave feminism. Ferrante writes: "my experience as a novelist, both published and unpublished, culminated, after twenty years, in the

[16] Karen, Bojar. *In Search of Elena Ferrante: The Novels and the Question of Authorship*, 2018, pg. 23.
[17] Betch C Rosenberg. "Virgina Woolf, Elena Ferrante, and the Angry Modern/ist Woman."
[18] "Elena Ferrante's 'The Lying Life of Adults." Reading in Translation.
[19] Elena, Ferrante. "Elena Ferrante: 'Even today, after a century of feminism, we can't fully be ourselves," 2018.

attempt to relate, with writing that was appropriate, my sex and its difference."[20] Her career as a novelist and essayist is itself a means of *autocoscienza* as in writing *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* she pulls from her background to tell a story of female identity. Ferrante writes: "I learned to dig inside myself thanks to the practice of consciousness raising, and it was women's thought that redeveloped my point of view."[21] Her engagement with consciousness-raising is similar to that which Elena experiences when she writes articles and essays in the novel. Ferrante states that when she read books to learn about female difference, she realized: "I had to start with myself and with my relationships with other women…if I really wanted to give myself a shape."[22] Elena also has this desire in the third novel after engaging with feminist thinkers. Although Ferrante has hinted that the plot for the Neapolitan Quartet stems from a personal friendship, whether or not the series is autobiographical is a question many readers quarrel with given Ferrante's attention to detail and dexterity in writing about the female experience. The first name of her pseudonym, "Elena," also suggests a deeper connection between the author and the character who share similar experiences in their writing careers, even if one is fictional.

Regardless of the autobiographical status of the Neapolitan Quartet, Ferrante believes that women often write to calm themselves in moments of crisis to better understand themselves. There are still stories which have not yet been told and "we discover it when daily life gets tangled up and we need to put it in order."[23] A woman does not need to approach feminism or writing through an academic setting as Elena does; instead, a woman who works in a factory similar to Lila can engage in the same practice. The role of writing is not only key to the

[20] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Frantumaglia: Papers: 1991-2003: Tesserae: 2003-2007: Letters: 2011-2016*, 2016, pg. 266.
[21] Ibid, pg. 302.
[22] Ibid, pg. 332.
[23] Ibid, pg. 347.

narrative development in the series as Elena intends to prevent Lila from disappearing through recording their story, but also to Ferrante's experience when she wrote the books themselves.

The Neapolitan Quartet and Female Friendship

Ferrante's four-book series—*My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*—follows Elena and Lila from their adolescence growing up in Naples to their adulthood. All four novels are told through the perspective of Elena as a woman in her sixties who has just been told that her friend Lila has disappeared. She recounts her and Lila's lives in order to ground her friend in the text so she cannot fully escape reality. In the third installment *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Lila, now separated from her first husband Stefano Carracci, moves into an apartment with her young son Gennaro and childhood friend Enzo Scanno while working in a nearby sausage factory. Meanwhile, Elena is gaining recognition in the literary world after a successful first novel. She is engaged to Pietro Airota, a professor and son of the respected Airota family. Her husband Pietro and her move to Florence where they have two daughters: Dede and Elisa. Although Elena and Lila spend time apart in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, their friendship and connection to writing remains persistent despite rising rivalry and anger between the two women.

The Neapolitan Quartet contributes to the developing literary canon of female friendship and has been characterized as a feminist *Bildungsroman*, as it traces the development of Elena's feminist consciousness as well as her and Lila's relationship to the Italian feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.[24] In fact, book reviews and blog posts written by literary critics and fans alike agree that the theme of friendship resonates most with readers.[25] Ferrante is focused on "the love, empathy, identification, competition, and cruelty that a lifetime of female friendship

[24] Lucy, Cosslett. "The brilliance of My Brilliant Friend: this series gives us female lives in full."
[25] Karen, Bojar. In Search of Elena Ferrante: The Novels and the Question of Authorship, 2018, pg. 68.

yields."[26] Through Lila and Elena, Ferrante is able to investigate how anger threatens female friendship between two women who are each other's opposites: Lila is intellectually gifted and fearless, while Elena is eager to please everyone and struggles to keep up with her brilliant friend.[27] The two women "ransack each other, stealing feeling and intelligence, depriving each other of energy."[28] Despite this at times toxic friendship, Elena wishes Lila "was here, that's why I'm writing. I want her to erase, add, collaborate in our story by spilling into it, according to her whim."[29] Elena wants to explore her relationship with Lila through these books to untangle what they were unable to talk about before Lila disappeared. After all, Elena's writing is her attempt to connect with Lila by recounting their lives in the pages of the book the reader is reading.

Lila and Elena's friendship ebbs and flows from caring to envious throughout the series, lending itself to being vulnerable to rivalry. Although Elena does not explicitly state her suppressed anger towards Lila, she subconsciously employs this rage as a driving force to write.[30] She "is haunted by the fear that Lila is the truly brilliant one and that she is an unworthy imposter" who is only successful due to persistence rather than talent.[31] Furthermore, Elena suffers from imposter syndrome: a common feeling of inadequacy all too familiar in the writing and publishing worlds. On competition, Ferrante explains rivalry is only helpful when "it coexists with affinity, affection, with a real sense of being mutually indispensable, with sudden peaks of solidarity in spite of envy, jealousy, and the whole inevitable cohort of bad feelings."[32]

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[26] Betch C, Rosenberg. "Virgina Woolf, Elena Ferrante, and the Angry Modern/ist Woman."
[27] Ibid, pg. 75.
[28] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Frantumaglia: Papers: 1991-2003: Tesserae: 2003-2007: Letters 2011-2016*, 2016, pg. 233.
[29] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 2013, pg. 105.
[30] Betch C, Rosenberg. "Virgina Woolf, Elena Ferrante, and the Angry Modern/ist Woman."
[31] Karen, Bojar. *In Search of Elena Ferrante: The Novels and the Question of Authorship*, 2018, pg. 78.
[32] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Frantumaglia: Papers: 1991-2003: Tesserae: 2003-2007: Letters 2011-2016*, 2016, pg. 359.

Lila's tremendous intelligence has influenced Elena's writing even as she develops her own voice in the third novel, not to mention that Elena is writing these novels on her own without the presence of Lila. On the other hand, Ferrante writes in her column for *The Guardian* that "the moment the inevitable feeling of inadequacy prevails, along with the impossibility of making oneself the sole purpose of another's life, there is no way out."[33] Elena's sense of inadequacy towards Lila is nuanced, much like their friendship, but each woman, Elena, Lila, and even Ferrante herself, is successful despite moments of feeling inferior. The friends' connection to writing and talking to each other over the years helps them navigate and reflect on their rivalry.

Elena, Lila, and *Autocoscienza*

Elena and Lila unpack their relationship through these very conversations that are evocative of *autocoscienza*. However, both women are opposed to traditional *gruppi di autocoscienza* and instead engage in this feminist practice over phone calls with each other and on their own through writing. When Elena attends these *gruppi di autocoscienza* with her high-school teacher Professor Galiani's daughter, Nadia, she becomes bored and is not stimulated by the conversations between the women in attendance. Instead, she writes: "I felt that I should do something like that with Lila, examine our connection with the same inflexibility, that we should tell each other fully what we had been silent about."[34] Elena often has a desire to talk with Lila and engage in *autocoscienza*, but her timidness and Lila's stubbornness make this difficult. Instead, they practice consciousness-raising in more indirect ways through phone calls. Later in the novel, Elena speaks with Lila about Michele Solara, the younger son of the local Camorrist leaders in their neighborhood, who has offered Lila various job positions. Elena hopes "that the old desire to confront [their] entire relationship and re-examine it, to elucidate and have full

[33] Elena, Ferrante. "Elena Ferrante: 'I don't believe people who swear they're not the jealous type,'" 2018.
[34] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 2013, pg. 281-282.

consciousness of it, would be realized. [She] hoped to provoke her and draw her in to other, increasingly personal questions."[35] However, Lila becomes annoyed during this phone call and acts coldly towards her friend, which demonstrates the oftentimes one-sided consciousness-raising between the two women. It is Elena, not Lila, who fantasizes about engaging in this consciousness-raising with her friend, and even dreams of an alternative future where they able to go to school together. She writes that "We would have written together, we would have been authors together, we would have drawn power from each other."[36] This dream vision demonstrates Elena's longing to talk and write with her friend, which is part of her motivation to write these books: not only to find her friend wherever she may be hiding, but also to force her into drawing connections between their experiences as women.

While Elena and Lila do not speak in explicit terms about their innermost secrets, their conversations over the phone are most successful in bringing to the surface secrets from their adolescence. In particular, their relationships with Nino Sarratore, who also grew up in the same neighborhood, is a reoccurring conflict between the two friends as they both fall in love with him at different points in the series. At the end of the third book, Elena informs Lila over the phone that she is leaving her husband Pietro for Nino. In response, Lila asks a slew of rhetorical questions and warns Elena that Nino will use her as he did to her in the second novel when they had a brief affair. She says "Why did you study so much? What fucking use has it been for me to imagine that you would enjoy a wonderful life for me, too?"[37] Her words make an impact on Elena who writes: "For an instant I saw myself exposed to her in all my possible pettiness as a person who had ruined herself for nothing."[38] Despite this conversation, Elena goes through with

[35] Ibid, pg. 304.
[36] Ibid, pg. 354.
[37] Ibid, pg. 417.
[38] Ibid, pg. 417.

the affair. Perhaps she pursues Nino because of her lasting love for him and desire to free herself of being a housewife; on the other hand, Elena may be acting out of jealousy as Lila slept with her childhood crush in *The Story of a New Name*. This telephone conversation exemplifies the shortcomings of *autocoscienza*, especially when the phone call is told through Elena's competitive and redemptive perspective rather than Lila's, who at this moment appears to be acting out of concern but also anger towards her friend. The subtle and oftentimes passive aggressive rivalry between the two women is one reason why they engage individual moments of *autocoscienza*, too stubborn to speak aloud their true thoughts.

In addition to the tensions between the two women, there are external factors which influence Elena and Lila's connection to consciousness-raising and second wave feminism. The presence of domestic violence in the series unfortunately reflects a reality shared by the female characters and women growing up and living in Naples. It is not until Lila becomes extremely ill from the horrid work conditions at the sausage factory that she opens up to Elena about sexual harassment in the workplace. Elena listens to her friend's suffering and remembers her own encounters with sexual predators. "When she told me about the drying room, I almost said: an old intellectual jumped on me, in Turin, and in Milan a Venezuelan painter I'd known for only a few hours came to my room to get in bed as if it were a favor I owed him."[39] But Elena holds back: "What sense was there in speaking of my affairs at that moment? And then really what could I have told her that had any resemblance to what she was telling me?"[40] Elena recognizes that shifting the conversation towards her own experiences would not help her friend in this moment, but the reader recognizes that while the women have different sexual backgrounds, they are both victims of sexual assault. While Lila is able to leave her abusive husband, her first

[39] Ibid, pg. 173
[40] Ibid, pg. 173-174.

sexual experience was marital rape—a trauma which she carries with her in her relationships with Nino and even Enzo whom she loves. Lila is not able to feel sexual pleasure, while Elena is able to achieve this in select affairs outside of her marriage, including her encounters with Nino. Each woman's ability to achieve sexual pleasure does not silence the trauma they have both experienced during puberty when sexual discovery should only be scary in the sense of finding freedom, not avoiding monsters who lurk in the alleyways at night. These conversations about the workplace, as well as Elena's affair with Nino, could lead to further *autocoscienza* between the two women as they grapple with what it meant to discover their sexuality when men took advantage of their adolescence. Instead, they are silenced by the stagnancy of change in Naples, a city where domestic violence is no stranger. Perhaps this silencing is one reason why Elena and Lila partake in *autocoscienza* separate from one another, where no one can listen to their reflective thoughts besides themselves.

In fact, their experiences practicing *autocoscienza* are more profound when they occur independent of each other. Elena engages in *autocoscienza* by drawing from her conversations with Lila and her own personal experiences as a woman writer during a decade where there were expanding opportunities for women. Through writing her novels, Elena explains that "there was something that truly agitated me, a bare and throbbing heart, the same that had burst out of my chest in that distant moment when Lila had proposed that we write a story together."[41] Although Elena experiences this agitation and passion separate from Lila, its origin is her friendship with Lila and their shared dream of becoming writers.

As a university graduate, Elena's connection to feminism is derived from her academic background. The feminist movement influences her writing, in particular Carla Lonzi's work

[41] Ibid, pg. 53.

which her mother-in-law, Adele Airota, introduces to her in the third novel; "every sentence resonated for her, especially the urgent need for women to free themselves from masculine intellectual traditions and resists the waste of female intelligence."[42] Throughout the book, Elena is determined to contribute to the genre of literary fiction, a field dominated by men, but also toils with her placement within the changing gender dynamics of the 1970s. Regardless of her feelings about engaging in *autocoscienza* groups, Elena develops a feminist consciousness and explores male and female sexuality in her first novel. Although Elena uses parts of *The Blue Fairy*, the novella Lila wrote as a child, she intertwines her own experiences with Lila's story. In *The Story of a New Name*, Elena spends a summer on Ischia where she meets the Sarratore family, including Nino and his predatory father, Donato, who sexually assaults Elena on two separate occasions. In their second sexual encounter, she "was not simply a victim" and "was proud of herself for losing her virginity, seeing herself as using Donato for her own ends."[43] While incorporating both incidents in her first novel, Elena found that writing about these traumatic experiences calmed her. She gains further clarity when writing *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* as the book "is the first time she has tried to put into words her tangled emotions about deeply the disturbing experience."[44] While writing both books helps Elena reflect on the sexual traumas from her childhood, these pages are sometimes reduced by select male and female readers to being dirty, filthy, and risqué because they reveal the truth behind a woman's sexual experience. Elena dares to contextualize her own, albeit forced, sexual awakening in the broader context of the mothers, daughters, and friends she grew up with in Naples. These works may be authored by Elena, but they echo Lila's influence on Elena's writing. Her reflections

[42]Ibid, pg. 154.
[43] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Frantumaglia: Papers: 1991-2003: Tesserae: 2003-2007: Letters 2011-2016*, 2016, pg. 101.
[44] Karen, Bojar. *In Search of Elena Ferrante: The Novels and the Question of Authorship*, 2018, pg. 101.

suggest a yearning to pick up the phone and talk with her best friend, maybe not about their past, but about their future so she may understand why her friend has disappeared.

Elena's first novel is the precedent for her writing career which gains further recognition in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. While Elena never thought of becoming a freelance journalist, she did it anyway "Because doing it I was happy. I felt disobedient, in revolt and inflated with such power that my meekness seemed a disguise" and "Nothing frightened me."[45] Her writing not only helps her untangle traumatic events from her childhood, but also engage with politics by writing articles about factory workers for the communist newspaper *l'Unità*. When Elena is on the frontlines of investigative journalism and news reporting, she embodies the fearlessness which she is ironically jealous of Lila embodying throughout their childhood and adulthood. At this point in her writing career, Elena also becomes a mother and begins a brief hiatus from her writing. It is not until her mother-in-law Adele introduces contemporary, radical feminist texts to her that Elena begins reading and writing again. Adele advises Elena to read the texts and "Don't miss anything, if you want to be a writer."[46] Elena has the privilege to have access to these literary journals, as well as a woman mentor to support her along her path to developing a feminist consciousness. But it is not through Adele or discussions with other women that Elena finds her voice and position in the movement; instead her friendship to Lila impacts this development. In the second half of the novel, Elena makes efforts to distance herself from Lila and explains that "I had to understand better what I was. Investigate my nature as a woman" because "I had been forced by the powerful presence of Lila to imagine myself as I was not."[47] Their previous conversations impact Elena's sense of self so much so that she adjusts her

[45] Elena, Ferrante and Ann, Goldstein. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 2013, pg. 235.
[46] Ibid, pg. 245.
[47] Ibid, pg. 282-283.

individuality to that of Lila's. Even though Elena begins to dedicate more time to reading and writing during the same time period, she still "drew Lila in, one way or another" which suggests their unbreakable bond.[48] However, there are moments when this bond is weaker because of Elena's jealousy and growing distance from Lila. Furthermore, Elena engages with consciousness-raising to better understand her identity as a woman, separate from Lila.

During this self-reflection period in her adulthood, Elena begins to formulate the thesis for her second published piece of writing. Without the practice of consciousness-raising, Elena would not have "discovered everywhere automans created by men."[49] Elena writes in her essay that God made *Ish*, the man, and then made *Isha'h*, from *Ish's* side. She argues that Eve is Adam as a woman, "and the divine work was so successful that she herself, in herself, doesn't know what she is."[50] What's more, "she doesn't possess her own language, she doesn't have a spirit or a logic of her own."[51] Without independence to explore her own language and logic, *Isha'h* believes her marginalized identity is the norm, not having the luxury of *autocoscienza* which the Female Revolt is trying to make accessible to all women. Elena's essay not only reflects characteristics from the second wave feminist movement in Italy but is also an example of what happens when *Isha'h* is able to go beyond *Ish* and discover her own language through writing and consciousness-raising. Elena draws from the radical feminist texts Adele introduced to her earlier in the novel, as well as her conversations with Lila, not to mention her own experiences as a young student who traveled north to study but now finds herself trapped in a marriage which stifles her ability to write. Despite this conflict between being a housewife and a working

[48] Ibid, pg. 281.
[49] Ibid, pg. 354.
[50] Ibid, pg. 375.
[51] Ibid, pg. 375.

woman, Elena has the privilege to acquire an education and become a published author, the very dream both her and Lila envision as young girls in Naples.

While Elena's feminism develops due to her academic exploration of feminist theory, Lila's feminism is derived from her experience as a lower-middle class working mother. However, both protagonists engage in *autocoscienza* in their own ways.[52] While both Elena and Lila attend primary school in the first novel *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila is forced to stop her formal education and instead work to help support her family. Elena's family is far more progressive in this sense, as her parents ultimately encourage her studies despite their anxieties while Lila's father in particular believes a woman should not exceed her duties beyond the kitchen. Even though Lila stopped going to school in fifth grade, her childhood friend and partner Enzo "believed that she had a much brighter intelligence than he did and attributed to her the miraculous quality of rapidly mastering any material."[53] Her ability to understand any and all materials presented in front of her, from classics such as Virgil's *Aeneid* to Enzo's books on engineering and computer programming, leads her to engage in writing in the third novel, even if it is not in a traditional format of a novel or essay as is the case with Elena. While both Lila and Elena are working mothers, their diverging social classes in the third novel makes feminism appear to be a luxury rather than a necessity. Lila may not identify as a feminist, but her character's plotline in the third installment of the series suggests she is a feminist icon—perhaps one more accessible to readers of all backgrounds.

In the beginning of *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Lila writes a pamphlet describing the horrific conditions in the sausage factory where she works. She explains the deplorable hygienic conditions and the consequential damages to worker's hands, bones, and

[52] Ibid, pg 152.
[53] Ibid, pg. 108.

lungs. After reading the pamphlet, Nadia praises "not only the political substance of the document but the writing: You're so clever, she said, I've never seen this kind of material written about in this way!"[54] Lila rediscovers her writing via the worker unions and communist groups gathering at the same time women are meeting in *gruppi di autocoscienza*. When Elena and Lila visit Professor Galiani after the pamphlet has been circulated, her critique of Lila for abandoning her education disappears and is replaced by words of praise for her writing: "It's courageous, new work, very well written. I wanted to see you so that I could tell you that."[55] While the two women discuss the state of the factory and workers' demands, Elena remain silent and jealous of the attention Professor Galiani gives towards Lila's writing. Elena's jealousy suggests the power of Lila's ability to write a pamphlet that not only reveals the conditions of the factory but is also more relevant and accessible to the working class than feminist texts. Lila's brilliance and natural writing abilities never disappear but remain just beneath the surface always available for Lila to retrieve and employ to contribute to social discussions, similar to how Elena writes on gender and feminism.

Later in the novel, Lila continues her education by way of her partner Enzo who is studying to become a computer engineer. Although computer programming is far from writing with a pen and paper, there remains a sense of creation reminiscent of penning a novel. When Lila and Enzo install a new computer program in Elena's house, she says: "I got lost following Lila, who knew everything about those words, those machines, that work."[56] Lila does similar installations for a technology company named Nola, where she makes enough money she could lead a life more comfortable than Elena. In fact, her brilliant software capabilities are partly why

[54] Ibid, pg. 155.
[55] Ibid, pg. 224.
[56] Ibid, pg. 298.

Michele Solara offers her job as the head of technology at an IBM data-processing center where her salary would be greater than Enzo's. Michele tells Elena that "Lina has something alive in her mind that no one else has, something strong, that jumps here and there and nothing can stop it."[57] Lila's determination and persistence to learn about all which surrounds her daily life go beyond Elena's closed mindedness when it comes to some aspects of progressive feminism. Her identity as a mother and working-class woman during the 1970s lends her character to being labeled a feminist leader even if she herself does not engage in the same circles which Elena has the privilege to meet.

While Elena writes about feminist topics, Lila directly experiences the impact of the movement. When Elena goes with Lila to purchase contraceptive pills from an underground gynecologist, Lila engages in an animated conversation with the doctor. She "asked increasingly explicit questions, made objections, asked new questions, offered ironic observations."[58] By the end, the two women become friendly and the gynecologist even hugs both Lila and Elena. While this encounter is by no means a traditional feminist discourse group, the doctor does not require Lila to pay for the pills and explains "it was a mission she and her friends had."[59] When Elena finds herself pregnant in the novel for the second time, she does not pursue abortion, saying: "I myself was afraid of trying that route, the very word made my stomach hurt."[60] Lila engages in everyday feminism and *autocoscienza* in ways which are almost too progressive for Elena. Even so, when Elena shares with Lila the same texts Adele gave to her, including *The Clitoral Woman and the Vaginal Woman*, Lila asks: "What the fuck are you talking about, Lenù, pleasure, pussy,

[57] Ibid, pg. 316.
[58] Ibid, pg. 196.
[59] Ibid, pg. 196.
[60] Ibid, pg. 258.

we've got plenty of problems here already, you're crazy."[61] Lila's working-class identity connect her to feminism even though she believes reading feminist theory is a waste of time that could be used to address problems facing everyday people. Furthermore, Lila is able to understand the shortcomings of feminism because she does not have the luxury to take a day off of her work and analyze the radical feminist texts Elena has become enamored with. Consequently, Elena's insecurities resurface, and she describes her friend's criticisms as vulgar. Here, the motif of rivalry returns, exemplifying how competition complicates *autocoscienza* and female friendship.

The Clitoral Versus the Vaginal Woman

I began this paper explaining my connection to the Neapolitan Quartet as well as contextualizing Elena and Lila in the second wave of feminism. Thus far, I have argued how both women engage in *autocoscienza*, whether together over the phone, or separately through their own academic and philanthropic writing. During these moments of reflection and consciousness-raising, the friends oftentimes feel envy and insecurity towards each other, emphasizing the complexity of female friendship. In addition, Elena and Lila also exemplify qualities of both the clitoral and vaginal woman defined by Carla Lonzi which further complicates their relationship to second wave feminism and each other.

It would be easy to argue that Elena exemplifies the clitoral woman as she directly engages with contemporary radical texts that help develop her feminist consciousness, not to mention she brings a female perspective to the fields of academia and writing, which are so often dominated by men. Elena develops her voice through her writing and becomes a published author all the while being a mother and engaging in a love affair that satisfies her emotional and sexual desires, unlike her marriage to Pietro. She is in many ways a modern woman who is a

[61] Ibid, pg. 282.

trailblazer in her industry. On the other hand, there are aspects of her character and plot trajectory which are more evocative of the vaginal woman. Elena's imposter syndrome and insecurities thwart her from being able to confront Lila about this very envy. She is also not as open to a more progressive society where contraception is normalized. Elena is the "safe" character who works hard but keeps her head down to a degree. This is not to discredit the value of her contributions to literature nor the self-reflection she experiences while writing. But there are moments throughout the series when the reader wants to scream at Elena for being too stubborn and afraid to engage in a truthful conversation with her friend.

Lila, on the other hand, is simultaneously a more dynamic character but also one which the reader is not as close to as we only understand her development through the point of view of Elena. Some may identify Lila as the "brilliant" friend who is fearless and too intelligent for her contemporaries. She is able to survive the trauma of her abusive childhood and early adulthood and work to support her son. In many ways she is a clitoral woman who does not even need the trend of feminism to be "feminist." Her character is in itself feminist: a working mother who teaches herself a curriculum that, in many ways, goes beyond Elena and Enzo's education. But Lila's brashness and indecency towards her friend, especially in the second novel when she engages in an affair with Nino whom Elena loves, put her at conflict with a goal of *autocoscienza*: to bring women's experiences *together* rather than apart. Lila rejects multiple social norms of marriage and depending on a man to make money, but she also does not have the same desire to escape Naples. But then again, her environment thwarts her identity as a clitoral woman to become fully realized, prompting her to disappear later in life.

In comparing Elena to Lila and vice versa, the reader engages in the same comparison which Elena is so often guilty of throughout the series. I am reminded of how I have compared

myself to other women in both our successes and failures in the academia and writing worlds. We are always striving to do more: whether it is to be a clitoral woman who disconnects from repressive ideologies, or to be published for the first time. No matter what we decide to do, modern society judges us, as does the Italian society in the Neapolitan Quartet. Both Elena and Lila lead very different lives, but members in and outside the neighborhood so often give criticisms about the decisions they have made throughout their lives, especially when it comes to their education, jobs, and relationships with men. We arrive at a dichotomy between the clitoral and vaginal woman, but also those who are able to *leave* and those who are forced to *stay*. Who leaves and who stays? Elena physically leaves Naples to move to Florence, but Lila leaves her friend in the end. In some ways Elena remains a vaginal woman until she is able to leave Naples and explore career opportunities, while Lila leaves all expectations of what she should and should not do when she is a young girl in elementary school. Ferrante suggests that it is time we stop comparing ourselves to these binaries and instead listen to one another without the threat of envy, rivalry, or competition before our brilliant friends disappear.

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