Elena and Lila: outside and inside the "same story"

Agata Nipitella[5]
Brown University

Abstract

This article is a reading of the friendship between the two protagonists of *The Neapolitan Novels* in light of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's theories. It suggests the influence of Irigaray in Ferrante's representation of Elena and Lila's female friendship. Ferrante drew inspiration from the philosopher to create the *play of shared creativity* between the two protagonists and design their opposite characters. Lila corresponds in many ways to the ideal female figure and behavior elaborated by Irigaray in *When Our Lips Speak Together*, while Elena represents the consequences of detachment from this model. Moreover, the society in which the protagonists live can be seen through the lens of Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*, an approach that reveals its patriarchal essence. These societal constraints and Elena and Lila's opposite ways of facing them do not allow a female bond outside what Irigaray calls "the same story" – namely, the usual separation that patriarchal economy demands from women.

Key words

Female friendship. The Neapolitan Novels. Luce Irigaray. Patriarchal constraints.

[5] Doutoranda em Estudos Italianos, na Brown University. Graduada na Universidade de Bolonha, com mestrado em Língua e Cultura Italiana para Estrangeiros.

Introduction

The most intriguing fact about *The Neapolitan Novels* is the exploration of a female friendship that lasts for over sixty years. This article interprets such friendship in light of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's theories. Ferrante herself, as she makes clear in *La Frantumaglia*,[6] has read Irigaray. Moreover, in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*[7], the author places the protagonist Elena near the feminist movements of the 70s and has her write a book that speaks of the invention of women by men, a subject very dear to the philosopher. Thus, Ferrante herself offers an interpretive key to her own work. Here, I propose that Ferrante provides Elena and Lila with opposite attitudes based on Irigaray's text *When Our Lips Speak Together*.[8] I also rely on two other Irigaray texts, namely *This Sex Which Is Not One*[9] and *Speculum of the Other Woman*,[10] to analyze the society in which the two protagonists live, suggesting that despite their differences, Elena and Lila share the inability to overcome their entanglement with the patriarchal society. This prevents them from preserving the ideal female friendship elaborated by Irigaray.

The influence of Luce Irigaray in the works of Elena Ferrante has been extensively explored by critics, especially concerning the mother-daughter bond that is a central thread in Ferrante's novels.[11] Indeed, many works have been published that consider Elena and Lila's friendship and the rapport between symbolic mothers and daughters in Ferrante's other books as forms of feminist entrustment.[12] Elisa Sotgiu shows the influence of Luce Irigaray in the way Ferrante represents the friendship between the two protagonists,[13] and posits that this relationship resembles the mother-daughter bond elaborated by the philosopher in her text *The One Does Not Stir Without the Other*,[14] but that at the same time it has some aspects of the ideal relationship between

[6] FERRANTE, Elena. **La Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey**. New York: Europa Editions, 2016a.
[7] FERRANTE, Elena. **Those who leave and those who stay** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2014.
[8] *IRIGARAY, Luce. When Our Lips Speak Together.* ***Signs****, Chicago, v. 6, n. 1, pp. 69-79, Autumn 1980.*
[9] IRIGARAY, Luce. **This Sex Which Is Not One**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
[10] IRIGARAY, Luce. **Speculum of the Other Woman**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985a.
[11] See, for example: SAMBUCO, Patrizia. Elena Ferrante's L'amore molesto: The Renegotiation of the Mother's Body. In: SAMBUCO, Patrizia. **Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women's Writing**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 129-151.
[12] See, for example: ELWELL, "Breaking Bonds"; MILKOVA, "Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy" and "The Translator's Visibility"; LUCAMANTE, "For Sista Only?"; DE ROGATIS, *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave*; RICCIARDI, "Can the Subaltern Speak in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?" and more.
[13] SOTGIU, Elisa. Elena Ferrante e il femminismo della differenza. Una lettura dell'Amica geniale. **Allegoria**, Palermo, v. XXIX, n. 76, pp. 58-76, 2017.
[14] IRIGARAY, Luce. The one doesn't stir without the other. **Signs**, Chicago, v. 7, n. 1, pp. 60-67, 1981.

women represented in *When Our Lips Speak Together*. Building on this insight, I suggest that Elena and Lila's friendship begins thanks to their collaboration and their moments of *shared creativity* (§ 1). Still, they are also deeply immersed in the conditionings of patriarchy (§ 2). Elena duplicates her male models to become something (§ 3), while Lila breaks every role assigned to her, trying not to succumb to societal constraints (§ 4). Despite the moments of creativity and collaboration, the friendship between Elena and Lila moves inevitably towards the patriarchal *sameness* imposed by their society (§ 5).

1. Elena and Lila's collaboration

The Neapolitan Novels' saga opens with the beginning of Elena and Lila's friendship, namely when the two girls need to recover their beloved dolls at Don Achille's. Before this episode, Elena and Lila live separate existences, although they live in the same neighborhood and are classmates. This new friendship is, in my view, possible thanks to the loss of their dolls. The doll is a recurring element in Ferrante's narrative and constitutes the symbol of the female condition in a male-dominated society, as the author herself explains in the collection of interviews and letters entitled *La Frantumaglia*: "Dolls can be stand-ins for women, in all the roles that patriarchy has assigned us" (FERRANTE, 2016a, p. 205). In *The Neapolitan Novels,* the two dolls Tina and Nu carry different meanings. The first association is doll-daughter, since, as Irigaray states, "in this 'game' of dolls, the little girl plays out the possibility of acting 'like' her mother, 'as' if she were the/her mother" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 77). Indeed, the little Elena takes care of her doll as if it were her daughter; in fact, for her, "the doll was alive" (Bf, 2012, p. 54). In this case, the doll suggests the idea of maternity, the function of motherhood, and it entails the destiny Elena and Lila are pushed to assume. Secondly, while playing with dolls, one can "represent oneself 'as' a doll", one can also imagine a kind of play with a representation of the self" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 78). The doll comes as a reflection of the girl's identity. It is no coincidence that, precisely as Elena and Lila, "Nu and Tina," the two dolls, "weren't happy. The terrors that we tasted every day were theirs" (Bf, 2012, p. 31). Lastly, following Irigarayan models, I consider the doll-woman an object since, in the dynamics of *The Neapolitan Novels,* women are treated as commodities that can be owned and exchanged among men. Thus, the dolls' loss corresponds to the separation from their meanings, which creates the conditions through and thanks to which Elena and Lila's friendship can occur. We should notice that in *The Neapolitan Novels,* the dolls' loss and their reappearance occur at the beginning and the end of the saga and coincide

with the beginning and the end of Elena and Lila's friendship. The young protagonists can establish a female collaboration through detachment from their dolls.

When Elena and Lila are alone, everything else loses importance and meaning. Elena, for instance, states that nothing is the same if Lila is not by her side: "I soon had to admit that what I did by myself couldn't excite me, only what Lila touched became important. If she withdrew, if her voice withdrew from things, the things got dirty, dusty" (Bf, 2012, p. 100). It is exclusively when the two girls are beside each other sharing their projects that life becomes meaningful. Already at an early age, Elena and Lila develop their own language leaving out the rest of the world and creating the dimension in which they can express themselves in complete freedom and with the utmost creativity:[15] "The exchange with Lila had given me a pleasure so intense […]. I felt clever again, as if something had hit me in the head, bringing to the surface images and words" (id., p. 103). "Hit in the head" is a metaphor that refers to a space of creativity that allows Elena and Lila to speak in their own way, or rather in a way that Irigaray would define as outside the "same story":

> If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again. Don't you feel it? Listen: men and women around us all sound the same. Same arguments, same quarrels, same scenes. Same attractions and separations. Same difficulties, the impossibility of reaching each other. Same ... same .... Always the same (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 69).

Irigaray maintains that creating a language different from the one forged by men is necessary for women to build an authentic and close connection with other women and change the way they interpret reality. Elena and Lila both think that they are the only ones capable of fully understanding the other:

> We were twelve years old, but we walked along the hot streets of the neighborhood […] like two old ladies taking the measure of lives of disappointment, clinging tightly to each other. No one understood us, only we two – I thought – understood one another (Bf, 2012, p. 106).

During their teenage years, the two protagonists share some moments of creativity and are able to get closer to each other and give voice to their own "I" together.

[15] During the ACLA 2021 International Conference in the panel entitled "New Global Perspectives on Elena Ferrante," Stefania Porcelli presented her ongoing research on particular words that Elena Ferrante uses in relation to the feelings experienced by women in her novels. Porcelli's example is the word "rabbie," which is peculiar because it is not usually used in the plural form. In other words, Porcelli is working to demonstrate that Ferrante is creating a web of "new" words to describe the feminine.

One example of this capacity occurs when Lila asks Elena to help her in altering her canvas that is going to be exhibited in the new shoe store against her will:

> the capacity we had to lift ourselves above ourselves, to isolate ourselves in the pure and simple fulfillment of that sort of visual synthesis. We forgot about Antonio, Nino, Stefano, the Solaras, my problems with school, her pregnancy, the tensions between us. We suspended time, we isolated space, there remained only the play of glue, scissors, paper, paint: the play of shared creation (Snn [16], 2013, p., 2013, p. 122).

This "play of shared creation" is what allows the two young women to find themselves and each other and suspend patriarchal constraints, as suggested by Stiliana Milkova in her recent essay "Female Collaboration in Ferrante's Fiction and Ferrante Studies."[17] Elena and Lila spend entire days together inside the store, absorbed in that *play* that makes them feel free and get them back to childhood. Another moment of *shared creation* in which the two young women *ignite each other's heads* occurs when Lila requests Elena's cooperation to spend the night with Nino. Even though Elena is still in love with him, she accepts the request and lets herself get carried away by the emotional flow of a new adventure with her friend: "The more her mind was ignited […], the more skillfully she ignited mine […]. Here was a new adventure, *together*. Here was how *we* would take what life didn't want to give us" (id., p. 274). However, these moments of shared creativity beyond the "same story" are rare and brief compared to those in which Elena and Lila are driven apart by societal conditioning.

2. The limits of the *play of shared creation*

The friendship between Elena and Lila is characterized not only by closeness and creativity but also by a deep feeling of antagonism. For instance, Elena states the following: "the uneasiness that the discovery of her fragility brought me was transformed by secret pathways into a need of my own to be superior" (Bf, 2012, p. 81). Elena feels a strange pleasure in noticing Lila's weaknesses and a desire to take advantage of them to surpass her. Lila is on the same page as her friend given that, according to Elena, she is discouraged by watching her shine: "We took the final test in elementary school together. When she realized that I was also taking the admission test for middle school, she lost

[16] "Snn, 2013, p." stands for FERRANTE, Elena. **Story of a New Name** (translated from Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2013.
[17] MILKOVA, Stiliana. Side by Side: Female Collaboration in Ferrante's Fiction and Ferrante Studies. **gender/sexuality/Italy**, Carlisle, n. 7, Feb. 2021.

energy" (id., p. 79). Like Stefania Lucamante[18], I believe that the way Ferrante depicts this female friendship troubles the very idea of sisterhood. But I also believe that the reasons behind this dynamic are strictly related to the societal conditioning in which they live.

There are several examples throughout *The Neapolitan Novels* that call attention to the patriarchal features of Elena and Lila's society. First, women are treated as objects to be traded. Lila, for instance, is considered by her father as an instrument to improve the socio-economic condition of the whole family. For this reason, he tries to force her into a convenient marriage with Marcello Solara: "Fernando felt as if he had stopped suffering, because, thanks to a close relationship with the Solaras, he could look to the future without anxieties" (id., p. 234). The world of *The Neapolitan Novels* is also full of indisputable acts of violence towards women, revealing the obedience into which women are forced. For instance, when the ten-year-old Lila wants to claim her right to attend middle school, her father is deeply angered and throws her out the window, breaking her arm. Excessive violence is perpetrated not only toward daughters but also toward wives. During the wedding of Lila and Stefano Carracci, Lila gets upset because her new husband has tacitly invited the Solara family. After the celebration, she pours her fury and indignation onto Stefano, who, in reaction, slaps her in the face: "a violent slap that seemed to her an explosion of truth" (Snn, 2013, p. 33). This is just the beginning of all the violence Lila will be subjected to during her marriage. Lila's mother is aware of this dynamic of violence, but she considers it ordinary, not at all outrageous. Instead, she states that this alternation of affection and violence always characterizes the relationship with a man: "Life is like that: one day you're getting hit, the next kissed" (id., p. 215-216).

In addition to subjecting women to violence, a patriarchal society creates female separation and mutual antagonism, born from the need to attract men's attention and acquire commodity value. In *The Neapolitan Novels,* women experience an intense enmity related to physical appearance. During puberty, the young women of the neighborhood observe one another, compare themselves with their peers, and aspire to surpass them. Elena, for instance, reaches puberty before Lila, and she needs to denigrate her friend to feel more beautiful: "Only she seemed taller […]. But what was that change? I had a large bosom, a womanly figure" (Bf, 2012, p. 134). During adulthood, the

[18] LUCAMANTE, Stefania. Undoing Feminism: The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante. **Italica**, Bloomington, v. 95, n. 1, pp. 31-49, Spring 2018.

antagonism increases. One example is Pinuccia, who is profoundly envious of Lila's beauty:

> Thus a contest began between the two girls, they went to the hairdresser together, they bought the same dresses. This, however, only embittered Pinuccia the more. She wasn't ugly, she was a few years older than us, maybe her figure was more developed, but there was no comparison between the effect made by any dress or object when Lila had it on and when Pinuccia wore it (id., p. 262).

Elena finds herself in similar competitiveness when she has to meet Nino Sarratore's wife, Eleonora, who is younger than her. Elena begins to obsess over her looks:

> I dressed, I undressed, I combed my hair, I uncombed it, I nagged Pietro. I went to his room constantly, now with one dress, now another, now with one hairdo, now another, and I asked him, tensely: How do I look? He gave me a distracted glance, he said: You look nice. I answered: And if I put on the blue dress? He agreed. But I put on the blue dress and I didn't like it (Twl,[19] 2014, p., 2014, p. 367).

As Irigaray writes, in patriarchal economies, value is ascribed to women by men because they lack their own symbolization. "This value," then, "is not found, is not recaptured, in her. It is only her measurement against a third term that remains external to her" (IRIGARAY, 1985a, p. 176). This value does not mirror her qualities neither as an individual nor as a woman; hence "its value is *transcendent* to itself" (ibid.). Subsequently, women have no mirror to reflect on and thereby lack any authentic self-representation.[20] The value attributed to them is nothing but a measurement that entails their being constructed. "Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body" (id., p. 187). The body is the currency by which a woman-commodity confronts other women-commodities. Indeed, this confrontation occurs "in terms of an equivalence that remains foreign to both" (id, p. 176). In other words, every woman cannot mirror herself in the other woman except as an exchange-value, which places women in a dimension of profound and absolute alienation from one another:

> just as commodities cannot make exchanges among themselves without the intervention of a subject that measures them against a standard, so it is with women. Distinguished, divided, separated, classified as like and unlike,

[19] "Twl" stands for FERRANTE, Elena. **Those who leave and those who stay** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2014.

[20] In *The Days of Abandonment* Ferrante elaborates on the mirror depicting it as a tool through which the female protagonist establishes a new relationship with her own self and other women. On this topic, see FERRER, Maria Reyes. La funzione dello specchio nel romanzo I giorni dell'abbandono di Elena Ferrante. **Cuadernos de Filologia Italiana**, v. 23, pp. 221-36, 2016.

> according to whether they have been judged exchangeable. ln themselves, among themselves, they are amorphous and confused: natural body, maternal body, doubtless useful to the consumer, but without any possible identity or communicable value (id., p. 187-188).

Irigaray goes on:

> just as a commodity finds the expression of its value in an equivalent […] that necessarily remains external to it, so woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex, constituted as a transcendental value: the phallus. And indeed the enigma of "value" lies in the most elementary relation among commodities. Among women. For, uprooted from their "nature," they no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men's desire, and according to the "forms" that this imposes upon them. Among themselves, they are separated by his speculations. (id., p. 188).

Elena and Lila's relationship is not spared in such a choking atmosphere of forced enmity. Elena, in particular, reveals her desperate need for men's attention to develop her self-esteem: "The attentions of Pasquale Peluso consoled me greatly […]. Maybe I'm not so ugly, I thought" (Bf, 2012, p. 123). She also reveals her antagonism towards her friend in numerous moments during the narration. Elena feels superior to Lila not only because she enters puberty before her but also because she has already received a declaration of love: "Suddenly she seemed small, smaller than I had ever seen her. She was three or four inches shorter, all skin and bones, very pale in spite of the days spent outside. […] And she didn't know what the blood was. And no boy had ever made a declaration to her" (id., p. 94). Not by chance does Elena judge the value of her friend based on her attractiveness. In the same way, when Lila grows up and turns into a beautiful young woman, Elena falls prey to envy: "The other declaration had come from Marcello Solara. In hearing that name I felt a pang. […] the love of Marcello […] was, in my eyes, […] the transition from skinny little girl to woman capable of making anyone bend to her will" (id., p. 184-185). Irigaray sharpens this tension to a fine point: "With respect to other merchandise in the marketplace, how could this commodity maintain a relationship other than one of aggressive jealousy?" (IRIGARAY, 1985a, p. 32).

In the article I mentioned above, Stiliana Milkova sees the antagonism between Elena and Lila as the root of a kind of cooperation: "A female authorial-creative collaboration lies at the heart of the four Neapolitan Novels. This idea is introduced in the narrative frame as a competition of sorts" (MILKOVA, 2021, p. 94). The scholar also argues that this "friendship dislodges the vertical patriarchal structures of power" (ibid.). We can certainly agree with this statement when considering the precise moments of *shared creativity* that I have mentioned in the previous section; however, it is also true

that antagonism appears as disruptive of the friendship, especially if we consider its entire evolution. Elena and Lila share the inability to live their lives outside the patriarchal "same story."

3. Elena and her obsession with *becoming*

The friendship between Elena and Lila also stumbles over their opposite ways of confronting the *sameness* that surrounds them. Elena falls prey to a deep yearning: "becoming something." "*Become*. It was a verb that had always obsessed me […]. *I wanted to become*, even though I had never known what. […] I had wanted to become something—here was the point—only because I was afraid that Lila would become someone and I would stay behind" (Twl, 2014, p. 346-347). Elena strongly wishes to get away from the neighborhood, from its customs and violence: "I'll get my diploma, I'll take the entrance exams, I'll win. I'll get out of this muck, go as far away as possible" (Snn, 2013, p. 315). By continuing her studies, she becomes a member of a new class of young people who read newspapers and debate about politics and economics. She brings Lila to a party organized by this new circle of friends, but the result is disastrous: "That night began the long, painful period that led to our first break and a long separation" (id., p. 163). Talking to her husband Stefano, Lila derides Elena as an ape:

> They do it because they were born there. But in their heads they don't have a thought that's their own, that they struggled to think. They know everything and they don't know a thing. […] If you were up there, Ste', all you'd see is parrots going *cocorico*, *cocorico*. You couldn't understand a word of what they were saying and they didn't even understand each other. […] You, too, Lenù, I have to tell you: Look out, or you'll be the parrots' parrot. She turned to her husband, laughing. You should have heard her, she said. She made a little voice, *cheechee*, *cheechee* (id., p. 162).

Lila sees Elena trying to acquire the language and manners of an intellectual élite composed only by men and accepts women only with strain, and only if they speak and reason as men do. In other words, Elena turns her back on the language that she can share with Lila while moving towards *sameness*. She worries about keeping up with men's discourses and feels ashamed when she realizes that her knowledge is insufficient and that she is not capable of holding a candle to her would-be peers. She unconsciously subjects herself to men's laws whose speculations and way of thinking are, to her, brilliant:

> I listened spellbound. Their words were buds that blossomed in my mind into more or less familiar flowers, and then I flared up, mimicking participation; or they manifested forms unknown to me, and I retreated, to hide my ignorance. In this second case, however, I became nervous: I don't know what they're talking about, I don't know who this person is, I don't understand. They were sounds without sense, they demonstrated that the world of persons, events, ideas were endless, and the reading I did at night had not been sufficient, I would have to work even harder in order to be able to say to Nino, to Professor Galiani, to Carlo, to Armando: Yes, I understand, I know (id., p. 158).

The expression "I understand, I know" comes as the one and the only way through which Elena is capable of self-affirmation among men. For Elena, one could say, Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* appears in an impoverished form: the "I think" is substituted by the "I understand, I know," in which "I think" represents an autonomous thinking ability. In contrast, "I understand, I know" entails a fundamental passivity since the subject restricts herself to absorbing and "under-stand" what others say. Elena's existence depends on the learning and repetition of ideas that do not belong to her in order to have an identity that men recognize. Indeed, she states: "If I hadn't learned to speak like that I would never have had any respect" (Slc,[21] 2015, p. 266). The extreme desire to speak *sameness* turns quickly into a subordination, caused by the belief that only one's superiors can speak it properly, just as Irigaray states:

> If you/I are reluctant to speak, isn't it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is "well" or "badly"? What model could we use to speak "well"? What system of mastery and subordination could persecute us there and break our spirits? Why aspire to the heights of a worthier discourse? (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 75).

Moreover: "If you wish to speak 'well' you constrict yourself, become narrower as you rise. Stretching, reaching higher, you leave behind the limitless realm of your body." (id., p. 75-76). When miming men, Elena feels there is someone else speaking in her place, and this "someone else" is endowed with the appropriate characteristics to be part of their circle: "Then I heard myself utter sentences as if it were not I who had decided to do so, as if another person, more assured, more informed, had decided to speak through my mouth" (Snn, 2013, p. 159-160). This contributes to the process by which Elena increasingly distances herself from the feminine nature embedded in the creative language and relationship with Lila. Irigaray envisages this doubling caused by the compliance to something that does not correspond to female nature, and she affirms:

[21] "Slc" stands for FERRANTE, Elena. **The Story of the Lost Child** (translated from Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2015.

> You/I then become two to please them. But once we are divided in two-one outside, the other inside-you no longer embraces yourself or me. On the outside, you attempt to conform to an order which is alien to you. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything that you encounter. You mime whatever comes near you. You become whatever you touch. In your hunger to find yourself, you move indefinitely far from yourself, from me. Assuming one model after another, one master after another, changing your face, form, and language according to the power that dominates you (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 73-74).

The more Elena improves her social condition by imitating male behavior, the more her relationship with her friend deteriorates. She lets herself be modeled by men in the hunger of "becoming something." It is precisely a man Elena chooses as a role model, namely Nino Sarratore, whom she considers the best version of herself since the young man achieves to put to good use his studies: "I proudly felt that I was like him, with the same desire to give myself an educated identity, to impose it, to say: Here's what I know, here's what I'm going to be" (Snn, 2013, p. 201). Once again, her self-affirmation occurs through the absorption of knowledge from the outside. To achieve her aim, she does everything she can to please him: "[I] listened to him spellbound, saying only, 'How clever you are.' And as soon as the moment seemed apt, I volubly if somewhat inanely praised his article in *Cronache Meridionali*" (id., p. 179). At the same time, there are occasions in which Elena senses that her opinion and her thoughts are irrelevant for Nino, and her only proper role is that of the admiring listener:

> But I also understood that there was no comparison with the exchanges I had had with Lila years earlier, which ignited my brain, and in the course of which we tore the words from each other's mouth, creating an excitement that seemed like a storm of electrical charges. With Nino it was different. I felt that I had to pay attention to say what he wanted me to say, hiding from him both my ignorance and the few things that I knew and he didn't. I did this, and felt proud that he was trusting me with his convictions (id., p. 195-196).

Once again, it is possible to notice the metaphor of "ignition," which evokes the incomparable creativity and complicity between Elena and Lila that is missing in Nino's case. Elena, this time, is aware of her subordinate role, but she is nevertheless pleased to play it as long as she has her little space in that élite to which she aspires. Even when she attends the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, she understands that its society is composed of men: "They were youths – almost all male, as were the outstanding professors and the illustrious names who had passed through that institution" (id., p. 403). Despite this awareness, she continues with her ambition to "become something" and covers her true feminine self with a "mask worn so well that it was almost a face" (id., p. 402), the mask of "reeducating my voice, my gestures, my way of dressing and walking,

as if I were competing for the prize of best disguise" (id., p. 402). Nino is always her point of reference, her syllabus and instructor together: "I'll drag Nino with me, I'll make him walk all night, I'll ask him what books I should read, what films I should see, what music I should listen to" (Twl, 2014, p. 39). Using Irigaray's words, we could say that Elena abandons the feminine creativity shared with Lila to subjugate herself to man and his language, losing contact with her self and with her friend:

> If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story. When we become tired of the same ones, we'll keep our desires secret, unrealized. Asleep again, dissatisfied, we will be turned over to the words of men- who have claimed to "know" for a long time. But *not our body.* Thus seduced, allured, fascinated, ecstatic over our becoming, we will be paralyzed. Deprived of *our movements.* Frozen, although we are made for endless change (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 76).

Elena is *asleep and turned over to the words of men*, lulled by a passivity that prevents her from acting and leads her to consider and accept events as immutable. For instance, when she starts romantic relationships with Antonio and Gino, she is not actually in love with them; she accepts the proposals because they are the only ones who declared their love to her. For all these reasons, Elena can be associated with that kind of woman that silences her feminine self and adapts to male desire:

> Indifferent one, keep still. If you move, you disturb their order. You cause everything to fall apart. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire: their world. Indifferent one, you must not move or be moved unless they call you. If they say "come," then you may go forward, ever so slightly. Measure your steps according to their need- or lack of need-for their own image. One or two steps, no more, without exuberance or turbulence. Otherwise, you will smash everything (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 71).

Elena moves towards male symbolization, namely towards the representation that men created for her. She waits to be *called* by men and assumes the role that the men surrounding her want her to play (at least until she gets to know feminist ideas later in life). This way of conducting most of her existence places her inside the "same story," preventing her from having with Lila the ideal female friendship theorized by Irigaray.

4. Lila breaks everything

Lila does not allow anyone to pigeonhole her. She distinguishes herself for her determination and her willingness to escape any fixity. As a girl, Lila fights for her education, brings Elena outside the neighborhood's borders, becomes a promising shoe

designer. She is the one who backs out of a marriage arranged by her father, breaking every rule. “Lila the shoemaker, Lila who imitated Kennedy’s wife, Lila the artist and designer, Lila the worker, Lila the programmer, Lila always in the same place and always out of place” (Slc, 2015, p. 471). In Elena’s eyes, Lila disrupts balances and creates new ones:

> I looked at her from the window, and felt that her earlier shape had broken, and I thought again of that wonderful passage of the letter, of the cracked and crumpled copper. It was an image that I used all the time, whenever I noticed a fracture in her or in me. I knew – perhaps I hoped – that no form could ever contain Lila, and that sooner or later she would break everything again (Bf, 2012, p. 265-266).

Since childhood, Elena has sensed that her friend is endowed with a force pushing her beyond every limit and allowing her to glimpse new and inconceivable horizons. Lila represents a type of woman that is the opposite of the one represented by Elena. Lila is never immobile, never fixed; she is always in constant movement. Elena describes one example:

> I understood suddenly why I hadn’t had Nino, why Lila had had him. I wasn’t capable of entrusting myself to true feelings. I didn’t know how to be drawn beyond the limits. I didn’t possess that emotional power that had driven Lila to do all she could to enjoy that day and that night. I stayed behind, waiting. She, on the other hand, seized things, truly wanted them, was passionate about them, played for all or nothing, and wasn’t afraid of contempt, mockery, spitting, beatings. She deserved Nino, in other words, because she thought that to love him meant to try to have him, not to hope that he would want her (Snn, 2013, p. 288-289).

Lila lives her own desires fully – not those of men – and always tries to be the leader of her life even when it seems impossible. She is ready even to jeopardize her own life when defending her decisions and desires. She corresponds to the kind of woman that Irigaray addresses in the following way:

> You are moving, You never stay still. You never stay. You never "are." How can I say you, who are always other? How can I speak you, who remain in a flux that never congeals or solidifies? How can this current pass into words? It is multiple, devoid of "causes" and "meanings," simple qualities; yet it is not decomposable. These movements can't be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These streams don't flow into one, definitive sea; these rivers have no permanent banks; this body, no fixed borders. This unceasing mobility, this life. Which they might describe as our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. For all this seems so strange to those who claim "solidity" as their foundation (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 76-77).

Lila is the opposite of Elena’s need of “becoming something”: Lila is “never-being.” She wants precisely not to have *permanent banks*. She is a river in spate that leads

her to fluidity and incessant movement. Her necessity not to be fixed in a specific form and role becomes unmistakable when she finds herself imprisoned in the role of Stefano Carracci's wife. The first sign of this necessity occurs when the young woman modifies a painting that will be exhibited in the Solara's new shoe store in Piazza dei Martiri: "The body of the bride Lila appeared cruelly shredded. Much of the head had disappeared, as had the stomach" (Snn, 2013, p. 119). Lila depicts what she feels she is, namely a *body with no fixed borders*. Elena participates but at the same time observes this scene and imagines that the young woman bears an intense fury against herself that is recognizable as the necessity to erase herself in the roles that have been attributed to her and that she hates fulfilling: "Lila was happy, […] because she had suddenly found […] an opportunity that allowed her to *portray* the fury she directed against herself, the insurgence […] of the need […] to erase herself" (id., p. 122). Indeed, immediately after, Elena understands that her friend is on the warpath because, thanks to the destruction of her own image, she feels a strong sense of freedom that is usually precluded to her, especially now that she is Stefano's wife: "she was overwhelmed by an exaggerated sense of herself, and it would take time for her to retreat into the dimension of the grocer's wife […] And she wanted to quarrel, she wanted to break, shatter" (id., p. 120). Lila has the strength to overturn situations, to modify the destiny that others have chosen for her. However, her determination is not sufficient to change the patriarchal norms that loom over her. Her wish to erase herself turns into an absolute necessity. Her attempt to find her space in that reality and express herself in liberty falls through the domain of the different men who have tried to bend her to their will. Precisely because "*she stood out among so many because she, naturally, did not submit to any training, to any use, or to any purpose*" (Slc, 2015, p. 403, emphasis in the original), Lila decides eventually to back out definitively and erase herself by disappearing. This act might be interpreted as an answer to Irigaray's question: "How can we shake off the chains of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, divest ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts?" (IRIGARAY, 1980b, p. 175- 176). However, I see Lila's disappearance more as a defeat than a divestment in Irigaray's sense as Lila cannot ultimately find her own self-expression inside the *sameness* of a patriarchal society that erases women's subjectivity. Although her withdrawal might represent a protest against society, I would like to stress the impossibility for Lila to find a space for herself in such a society, hence her disappearance, which places her back within "the same story."

5. *Absent from themselves*: The inevitable separation

The permanent separation of Elena and Lila seems nearly predictable given the constraints in which they live. It is no coincidence that their friendship is defined by very long periods of separation and very few moments of reconciliation. The sporadic creative moments of their friendship turn increasingly into a distant memory, just as Irigaray envisages:

> If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again .... Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. Far. Above. Absent from ourselves, we become machines that are spoken, machines that speak (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 69).

This is what happens to the two women: they fail each other. In one way or another, Elena and Lila are stuck in *this sameness* and are becoming *absent from themselves*. Lila tries desperately to make Elena realize that she is a *machine that is spoken* and pushes her to abandon the *mask* she is wearing. There is a scene, for instance, in which Lila reproaches her friend for the contents of her book:

> Then her voice broke, she almost cried: You mustn't write those things, Lenù, you aren't that, none of what I read resembles you, it's an ugly, ugly book, and the one before was too. […] Was she sobbing? I exclaimed anxiously: Lila, what's wrong, calm down, come on, breathe. She didn't calm down. They were really sobs, I heard them in my ear, burdened with such suffering that I couldn't feel the wound of that *ugly, Lenù, ugly, ugly* (Twl, 2014, p. 272-273).

Lila begs Elena to change her language and writing because they do not belong to her and do not even resemble who Elena is; they are words of the "same… same… always the same" (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 69). Her frantic demand reminds us of Irigaray's exhortation:

> Get out of their language. Go back through all the names they gave you. I'm waiting for you, I'm waiting for myself. Come back. It's not so hard. Stay right here, and you won't be absorbed into the old scenarios, the redundant phrases, the familiar gestures, bodies already encoded in a system. Try to be attentive to yourself. To me (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 69-70).

Lila urgently requests her friend to go back to truthful language. Unfortunately, Elena does not comprehend her message and, instead, recognizes in her friend's words the sign of the end of their relationship. Elena, in the end, acknowledges their separation and recognizes to be by now utterly different from Lila: "I was that, I had to accept it. Lila, whatever turn her life might take, was different" (id., p. 278). Only the

contact with feminist theories during her adulthood makes Elena realize her imitation of men: "And no one knew better than I did what it meant to make your own head masculine so that it would be accepted by the culture of men; I had done it, I was doing it" (id., p. 281). However, this new awareness is not sufficient to recover the friendship with Lila: "We had maintained the bond between our two stories, but by subtraction. We had become for each other abstract entities […]. We both needed new depth, body, and yet we were distant and couldn't give it to each other" (id., p. 315). Once again, they are *absent from themselves* as from each other. Elena visualizes how things would be now if she and Lila had continued their path next to each other and comprehends the waste of creativity:

> elbow to elbow, allied, a perfect couple, the sum of intellectual energies, of the pleasure of understanding and the imagination. We would have written together, we would have drawn power from each other, we would have fought shoulder to shoulder because what was ours was inimitably ours. The solitude of woman's mind is regrettable, I said to myself, it's a waste to be separated from each other, without procedures, without tradition. Then I felt as if my thoughts were cut off in the middle, absorbing and yet defective, with an urgent need for verification, for development, yet without conviction, without faith in themselves. Then the wish to telephone her returned, to tell her: Listen to what I'm thinking about, please let's talk about it together […]. But the opportunity was gone, lost decades ago (id., p. 354).

The distance between Elena and Lila has turned into an unbridgeable abyss. Their separation is mainly irreversible, and the play of *shared creativity* is now an empty conversation about banal everyday life:

> I made the expensive intercity calls […] hoping that, in line with an old habit, she would send my imagination in motion. Naturally I was careful not to say the wrong things, and I hoped that she wouldn't, either. I knew clearly, now, that our friendship was possible only if we controlled our tongues. […] So we confined ourselves to talking about Gennaro, who was one of the smartest children in the elementary school, about Dede, who already knew how to read, and we did it like two mothers doing the normal boasting of mothers (Twl, 2014, p. 261).

The brilliant friendship between Elena and Lila comes definitively to an end. Elena spends half of her life disappearing under the masks she chooses to wear, while Lila decides to vanish without a trace. They both lose themselves and each other: "So many images and appearances separate us, one from another. […] You and I, divided" (IRIGARAY, 1980, p. 79). The patriarchal *sameness* of their reality swallows Elena and Lila as they cannot establish a long-lasting female collaboration outside the "same story." The struggle for adaptation or rejection of men's laws extinguishes the possibility of the

two protagonists remaining close to each other; because the restraints are too strong and leave no space. This brilliant friendship between Elena and Lila begins outside the "same story" but is crushed into the shape of *sameness* that patriarchal logic demands, not dislodging at all "the vertical patriarchal structures of power."

Works Cited

FERRANTE, Elena. **My Brilliant Friend** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2012.

—. **Story of a New Name** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2013.

—. **Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2014.

—. **The Story of the Lost Child** (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein). New York: Europa Editions, 2015.

—. **La Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey**. New York: Europa Editions, 2016a.

DE ROGATIS, Tiziana. **Elena Ferrante: parole chiave**. Roma: E/O, 2018.

ELWELL, Leslie. Breaking Bonds: Refiguring Maternity in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*. In: RUSSO BULLARO, Grace and LOVE, Stephanie (editors). **The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 237-269.

FERRER, Maria Reyes. La funzione dello specchio nel romanzo I giorni dell'abbandono di Elena Ferrante. **Cuadernos de Filologia Italiana**, v. 23, pp. 221-236, 2016.

IRIGARAY, Luce. **Speculum of the Other Woman**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985a.

—. The one doesn't stir without the other. **Signs**, Chicago, v. 7, n. 1, pp. 60-67, 1981.

—. **This Sex Which Is Not One**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

—. When Our Lips Speak Together. **Signs**, Chicago, v. 6, n. 1, pp. 69-79, Autumn 1980.

LUCAMANTE, Stefania. Undoing Feminism: The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante. **Italica**, Bloomington, v. 95, n. 1, pp. 31-49, Spring 2018.

—. For Sista Only? Smarginare l'eredità delle sorelle Morante e Ramondino, ovvero i limiti e la forza del post-femminismo di Elena Ferrante. In: CAO, Claudia and GUGLIELMI, Marina (editors). **Sorelle e sorellanza nella letteratura e nelle arti**. Florence: Franco Cesati, 2018, pp. 315-334.

MILKOVA, Stiliana. Artistic Tradition and Feminine Legacy in Elena Ferrante's L'amore molesto, **California Italian Studies**, Los Angeles, v. 6, n. 1, 2016, pp. 1-15. Available online at https://escholarship.org/uc/item/15s5c850

—. The Translator's Visibility or the Ferrante-Goldstein Phenomenon. **Allegoria**, Palermo, n. 73, 2016, pp. 166-173.

—. Side by Side: Female Collaboration in Ferrante's Fiction and Ferrante Studies. **gender/sexuality/Italy**, Carlisle, n. 7, Feb. 2021.

RICCIARDI, Alessia. Can the Subaltern Speak in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?. **Estetica: studi e ricerche**, Bologna, v. 7, n. 2, pp. 293-312, 2017.

SAMBUCO, Patrizia. Elena Ferrante's L'amore molesto: The Renegotiation of the Mother's Body. In: SAMBUCO, Patrizia. **Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women's Writing**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 129-151.

SOTGIU, Elisa. Elena Ferrante e il femminismo della differenza. Una lettura dell'Amica geniale. **Allegoria**, Palermo, v. XXIX, n. 76, pp. 58-76, 2017.

ELENA E LILA: FORA E DENTRO DE "A MESMA HISTÓRIA"

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a amizade entre as duas protagonistas da Tetralogia Napolitana, à luz das teorias da filósofa feminista Luce Irigaray. A análise demonstra a influência de Irigaray sobre o modo como Ferrante representa a amizade feminina entre Elena e Lila. Ferrante inspirou-se na filósofa para construir o jogo de criatividade compartilhada entre as duas protagonistas e para desenvolver suas personalidades opostas. Lila corresponde, de muitas maneiras, à figura e ao comportamento femininos ideais, conceito elaborado por Irigaray em *When Our Lips Speak Together*, enquanto Elena representa as consequências do distanciamento desse modelo. Este artigo analisa ainda a sociedade em que vivem as protagonistas, à luz das obras *This Sex Which Is Not One* e *Speculum of the Other Woman*, ambas também de Irigaray, revelando a essência patriarcal dessa sociedade. Tais restrições sociais e as formas opostas como Elena e Lila as enfrentam não permitem, entre elas, um vínculo feminino fora do que Irigaray chama de "a mesma história" – ou seja, a habitual separação que a economia patriarcal exige das mulheres.

Palavras-chave

Amizade feminina. Tetralogia Napolitana. Luce Irigaray. Mesma história. Criatividade compartilhada. Restrições patriarcais.

Recebido em: 31/07/2021

Aprovado em: 14/10/2021