

Fictionalized Italian Gender Relations Through Ferrante and Ammaniti

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Abstract

The thesis investigates sexual assault and gendered violence in Italy using a study of Italian gender relations through sociopolitical research and literature. Beginning with an inclusion of the author's independent study *Siamo Lei*, the subjugation of Italian women is considered through three systems: the church, the state, and the home. After describing the condition of woman in Italy, the thesis includes a personal narrative of sexual assault in the country. To connect the personal experience with the more general lived experience in Italy, the thesis uses literature from two Italian novelists. From that framework, there is a critique of the sexual assault statistic in Italy and the argument that the number does not account for unreported assaults and, therefore, cannot be an indicator for the real situation in the country. The thesis ends with a critical analysis of Italian masculinity and its connection to gendered violence, and offers solutions to the Italian gendered problem. It should be noted that the thesis considers primarily heterosexual relationships between men and women, and a queer study of gender in Italy could be a future site of exploration.

I. Subjugation of Women in Italy

The three most important foundations of Italian society support the violent dichotomy between men and women: the church, the state, and the home. Italian women are being raped, beaten, and killed because of misogynistic and archaic systems that raise men up while pushing women down. Society wants women to be quiet so that men can be heard. Women are supposed to be weak so that men can be strong. As Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum said in her study *Liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy*, "Woman was what nature created, husband demanded, children expected, society requested, mother educated her to be, culture taught her to be, God wanted"

(Birnbaum 189). Women in Italy are not asking to be mistreated, it is men who are being told to mistreat. This paper will consider the implications the three historical and patriarchal systems have for women in Italy today, including a personal narrative of the effects of the current sociopolitical conditions in the country.

The Church:

The Church is the most powerful and patriarchal institution in Italy. According to the CIA's World Factbook, 80% of the country is Christian, and predominantly Roman Catholic ("The World Factbook"). While not all of that 80% are practicing Catholics, the number does signify a pervasiveness of Catholicism in the country. At the head of the Church is the Pope, a position currently held by Pope Francis. Pope Francis, considered one of the more liberal and popular Popes in history, has publicly supported an antifeminist agenda on the topics of women's reproductive rights and gender equality in the Church. Since approximately 80% of Italians respect God's appointed figure of omnipotence and omniscience, his personal and Church-authorized antifeminist opinions have a trickle-down influence on national beliefs that affect the actions of the government and the Italian family.

The Pope upholds the traditionalist opinions of the Church on women. Since Adam and Eve, the Church has believed in and advocated for the subjugation of women under men. It is no coincidence that the head of the Church is a man. There are rigid patriarchal structures in the Church that keep men in power. As explained in the article "Pope: Women will be banned from the priesthood forever," Pope Francis declared, on November 2, 2016, that the "Catholic Church's ban on female priests will stand forever" (Bacon 1). With women excluded from the priesthood, confined to lower positions like that of the nun, they will never have the power or influence to successfully advocate for women's perspective or their rights.

The Church does not want women's perspective or open advocacy for their rights and health. In 2012 the Vatican began an investigation on nuns in the United States who they believed were too political and feminist. The investigation, which began under Pope Benedict XVI and was terminated with Pope Francis in 2015, accused the nuns of "collectively tak[ing] a position not in agreement with the church's teaching on human sexuality" and was concerned about the "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith," including birth control (Whitman 1). Through the investigation, the Vatican, the center of the Catholic Church, made its public affirmation against feminism and set a warning for nuns in the future who may try to advocate for fellow women and their reproductive health. Laurie Goldstein in "Vatican Ends Battle With U.S. Catholic Nuns' Group" reported that although the Pope met with women representatives of the American nuns in question, he never publicly gave an explanation for the end of the investigation. Eileen Burke-Sullivan, a theologian and consultant for women's religious orders, said "It's about as close to an apology, I would think, as the Catholic Church is officially going to render" (Goldstein 1).

The Catholic Church prioritizes its ideologies over the health of its women followers. It has historically considered reproduction a duty of its followers; "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'" (Genesis 9:1). The Church believes that the woman's body was created to yield children, and her autonomy was meant to be sacrificed for God's word. The Church considers manufactured birth control and the procedure of abortion unnatural and antithetical to God's will. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, written by Pope John Paul II and published by the Vatican in 1992, states that all sexual acts must be "unitive and procreative" (par. 2366) and condemns the use of contraceptives as "intrinsically evil" (par. 2370). Condoms, although necessary to protect against sexually

transmitted diseases, are not supported by the Church because they prohibit conception. The condemnation is dangerous for women, who lose control over their health and womb when contraceptives are not used. Without condoms, many women are made victims to unwanted pregnancy in a country that makes it difficult to receive an abortion.

Jacqueline Andall, in *Abortion, Politics, and Gender in Italy*, explained that before abortion's legalization in 1978, under the fascist Rocco code of 1930, it was considered a "crime against the integrity and health of the race" that carried "penalties of between two to five years both for the woman involved and the person performing the abortion" (Andall 241). The illegality pushed many women to dangerous "backstreet abortions" (Andall 240). The backstreet abortions were the "third-biggest cause of death for women" (Giuffrida 1).

Although abortions have been legal in Italy since 1978 with Law 194, many Italians morally object to the procedure and make it unavailable to women throughout the country. In 2014, Pope Francis publicly supported moral objectors to abortion and was quoted saying, "To play with life is a sin against the Creator," and asked that doctors make the "brave choice, even up to the point of civil disobedience, never to commit abortion" (White 1). Under Law 194, doctors are within their rights to refuse a woman the procedure, and doctors across the country are exercising that right. According to Silvana Agatone, a doctor at a hospital in Rome and president of the Free Italian Association of Gynaecologists for the Application of Law 194, 70% of doctors across Italy are moral objectors (Giuffrida 1). Agatone goes on to say that "In the Lazio region [which includes the major city of Rome] alone, 80 percent of gynaecologists are 'moral objectors'" and "The situation is even more chronic in the south, with 90 percent of doctors invoking the conscience clause" (Giuffrida 1). Even when a woman can find a doctor for the procedure, she must go through a 7-day deliberation period in the hope that she'll change her

mind (Andall 245). The situation is making Italian women desperate and putting their health at risk. Law 194 is a prime example of the state creating laws that legitimize and strengthen the ideologies of the Church instead of creating laws for the people.

The State:

There is a masculine and patriarchal bias in the Italian state that threatens women's rights and makes them unequal citizens to men. Historically, laws in the country have been created and implemented from a male perspective. From the treatment of marriage to sexual assault, men have a privileged position in society that allows their abuse of women with little to no consequences.

The state institution of marriage in Italy chains women to a subordinate position in society. An example of this can be found in historical Sicily, where the societal code of honor had real implications for women, which were supported by state law. As Lucia Birnbaum said in *Liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy*:

The Sicilian code of honor gave a husband the prerogative of killing a wife and her lover if they were found together. A man who wished to marry a woman who did not want him could do so by raping her: under the code of honor she had to marry him. (Birnbaum 240)

These murders, gendered crimes against women, were not considered crimes against the person until 1996 because women were not considered important people to the state, except as producers of new citizens. As explained in Sonja Plesset's *Sheltering Women: Negotiating Gender and Violence in Northern Italy*, the 1930 law *Il Codice Rocco* called these 'code of honor' crimes "crimes against morality," the morality belonging to the father, husband, or brother of the woman attacked (Plesset 143).

Honor is an integral part of Italy's cultural foundation. As explained in Joseph Vandello and Dov Cohen's "Male honor and female fidelity: implicit cultural scripts that perpetuate domestic violence", a man's honor is tied to his ability to enforce his will on others (998). For women, "norms for females stress modesty, shame, and avoiding behaviors that threaten the name of the family" (998). Unfortunately, there is no system of checks and balances; men monitor their women and judge other men, but women are not supposed to question men or their authority. This male monitoring is typically performed through violence, and has made domestic abuse "the most pervasive form of violence in the country" (Hossain 1). Barbie Latza Nadeau, in her article "Italy Passes New Anti-Domestic Violence Measures", found that 75% of the 81 murders that had been committed in Italy by the time of the article's 2013 publication date had been "perpetrated by husbands, boyfriends, or exes" (Nadeau 1). Men are hitting their women to keep them subordinate; Vandello and Cohen found that "the leading motive of relationship violence is males' suspicion of infidelity or desertion... violence is thought to be able to restore women's reputation and fidelity" (997). A woman's autonomy and power is not societally viewed as beneficial for her, but threatening for men. Nadeau noted that a Catholic priest in La Spezia encouraged men to maintain their power through violence when he posted on his church's bulletin board that "women become arrogant in their independence", and that this independence provokes "the worst instincts [in men], leading to violence and sexual assault" (Nadeau 1).

There have been recent laws passed to protect Italian women, but the implementation of the laws is compromised because of the patriarchal roots deeply embedded in Italian culture. Domestic violence has persisted because "it will take a lot more than new rules to change old attitudes" (Nadeau 1). The ex-Prime Minister Enrico Letta, who called the domestic crisis in Italy "femicide," passed legislation in 2013 that "includes stricter penalties for men who attack

pregnant women, harass or stalk current or ex-girlfriends and wives, and allows police to remove an abuser from the family home” (Hossain 1). The new laws may look good on paper, but when the male-dominated police force oversees the enforcement of those laws, their worth diminishes. Celia, a female lawyer in Parma, explained that it is “very difficult to prove the existence of violence in the family” (Plesset 144). The police, supported by the state, pressure families to handle violence internally without their assistance, creating an environment where men can do harm with little fear of consequences and women feel trapped in their lack of support. Plesset found that between 1981 and 1987 there were 20,007 charges of intimate partner violence, but only 2,773 convictions because “police are reluctant to keep accurate records” (Plesset 18).

The same honor discourse has historically been applied to sexual assault and rape cases in the country. Rape and sexual assault came to be recognized as crimes against the person only in 1996 (Plesset 143). Still, there is a victim-blaming discourse in Italy that perpetuates rape culture. As recently as 1999, in the case of *La Ragazza in Jeans*, the Italian Supreme Court overturned the conviction of a 45-year-old driving instructor accused of brutally raping a teenage student because she was wearing jeans, which “cannot be taken off, even partially, without the collaboration of the person wearing them” (Plesset 142). Men are excused for their violence because of the idea that their sexuality is more important than a woman’s physical, sexual, and emotional health. Male consumption of female bodies, either visually or physically through assault, are “playfully passed off as ‘Italian manly charm’” (Hossain 1). Pope John VI in his encyclical *The Human Vitae* accepted men’s inability to resist women’s “tempting nature” (Andall 239). Men’s pleasure is valued more than women’s health and safety, and men are told they can do what they want to women with little consequence.

Although the 1996 amendment to rape law toughened punishment for offenders, the state

still has statutes in place that help pardon men; Plesset explained:

According to Italian law, a jail sentence is automatically reduced by a third if the defendant entered a plea bargain or agreed to a trial without witnesses... The sentence is reduced by another third if there are extenuating circumstances (such as being intoxicated at the time of the act), and the sentence is often further reduced or even suspended if it is a first-time offense. (Plesset 143)

With the reductions, sexual assault and rape charges have the possibility of being treated as slaps on the wrist, instead of being properly punished for the seriousness of the crime.

The Church and State in the Home:

Fathers and husbands were given state control over the women in their life because men were considered the head of the family. The state helps keep women bound to their men, particularly wives to their husbands. For example, the 1975 “Paternal Authority” was only ungendered in 1990 when the name was changed to “Parental Authority”, but the father is still referenced as having ultimate authority in Italy (Plesset 141). Women, not wanting to jeopardize their relationship with their children, are pressured into staying with their husbands even when they want a divorce.

Divorce has been legal in Italy since 1970, but as detailed in Philip Pulella’s Huffington Post article “Divorce in Italy Will Be Quicker and Easier With New Law”, “the 1970 law imposed a mandatory five-year separation period intended to make couples reconsider. In 1987, this was reduced to three years” (Pulella 1). It was not until 2015 that the separation period was reduced to six months, although a 300-day waiting period after the divorce to remarry remained intact (Pulella 1). In comparison to the United States, as shown in marriage expert Sheri Stritof’s article “U.S. Waiting Times After Divorce”, most states have either no waiting period for

remarriage after the divorce is finalized, or a waiting period of a few days (Stritof 1). The Italian state forces spouses to remain connected in hopes of a reconciliation, because the state does not have great welfare programs and relies heavily on the family unit (Plesset 123). The lack of welfare support “overburdens women with pressure to stay with their husbands for resources” (Plesset 123). Forced to stay with men for financial support, many women must silently suffer through abuse and violence in the home.

In her book, author Sonja Plesset interviews victims of domestic violence from Parma, Italy. One of the women interviewed, a 75-year-old divorcee named Lucia, explained that while she was married to her abusive husband, both her parents and her in-laws considered him a “bum” for his abuse (Plesset 107). However, after she filed for divorce, her family blamed her for destroying the marriage. Lucia explained, “You're good because you endure, because you put up with it. But when this girl who is so good says, ‘enough,’ then he becomes the victim and you become the one who ruined the family” (Plesset 107). Italian society, having designated men as the important gender, tells women that their value lies in being obedient wives and mothers. There is more of a problem with women leaving than there is with men being abusive during the relationship. When a beaten woman confided to her doctor about the abuse at home, she was told, “Signora, don’t press charges, he’s your husband” (Plesset 19).

The women most categorically trapped in Italy are wives and mothers. The domestic Italian woman is confined to the house, and so is her worth. There is the “idea that women should sacrifice their health and happiness for the greater good of the marriage” (Plesset 107). She is not meant to be the financial supporter of the family, nor to have duties outside of the household, because those are masculine responsibilities. She is wife first, a mother next, and then a woman. As wife, the Italian woman is supposed to, as Plesset’s previously mentioned

interviewee Lucia said, “endure” (Plesset 107). In taking her husband’s name, she binds herself to him under the Church and state. Birnbaum, in *Liberazione Della Donna*, explained that women are considered “instruments of male pleasure, reproducers...” (Birnbaum 126). The wife is expected to give all of her sexual capacities to her husband, and he is expected to use her body for pleasure and reproduction. This puts “women in constant terror of the consequences of sexual acts demanded by her husband” (Birnbaum 127). As stated in Zygmunt G. Baranski’s *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture, and History*, women are “socially deprived and faced to deal with lack of agency over their body in terms of abortion and contraception” (Baranski 111). With the stigma around contraceptives and the rarity of abortions throughout the country, women are made highly susceptible to pregnancy, whether or not they want motherhood.

Motherhood is valued by both the Church and the state for its “defense of the Italian stock” (Plesset 139). As Katharine Mitchell and Helena Sanson said in *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres*, “mothers are supposed to promote state religion and the nation, thereby helping the family, the schooling system, state, and society” (Mitchell and Sanson 48). As domestic workers, their job is to create good Italians, good Catholics; to raise feminine, obedient daughters and masculine, dominant sons. Italian women, recognizing that the Church and state prioritize mothers while paradoxically neglecting women, may pushback against the expectation of motherhood. This could explain why Italy has one of the lowest birthrates in the world.

Sons are taught to be men by their mothers and fathers, and confined to masculine spaces. They are excluded from domestic duties like cooking, ironing, and doing laundry; as Plesset argued, “men don’t do household duties and many women don’t want them to because it might diminish the paternal image their children have of them” (Plessett 128). Men are expected to be

the breadwinners of the family, but the unemployment crisis in Italy is threatening an integral part of their identity. According to a Trading Economics report, Italy's unemployment rate as of October 2016 is the fifth highest in the world with a 37.1% youth (ages 15 to 24) unemployment rate and a 11.6% general unemployment rate ("Italy Youth Unemployment Rate"). This lack of employment and domestic skills, necessary to function on your own, may be the reason why 52% of Italian men between 25 and 34 are living at home with their mothers (in comparison to only 25% of American men in the same age group), according to David Harding's article "52% of Italian men still live with their mothers" (Harding 1). The codes of masculinity enforced by parents are stunting to sons' personal and emotional growth.

Sons may not be taught to cook or clean, but they are taught strict codes of masculinity. Italian masculinity is influenced by the concept of *machismo*, a way of conceiving the model Latin male. Dr. Fernando Ortiz argues, "machismo has existed in many cultures, with special salience in traditional Mediterranean cultures," and defines it as, "aggressive hypermasculinity, an obsession with status, power, and control at any cost, rigid self-sufficiency, misogynistic and domineering attitudes" (Ortiz 1). For the Italian male, 'unmanliness' is considered shameful to the family name; a sign that the parents failed to raise a real man.

Parents are supposed to teach their sons that "he who burps louder and hits more women is more of a man" (Plesset 138). Men are told by society that emotional is synonymous with weak. Unable to express their emotions, they find an outlet through physical violence because it has been reinforced as masculine by their parents. As mentioned in Birnbaum's *Liberazione Della Donna*, "a violent man is better than no man at all" (Birnbaum 241). In the *machismo*, hyper-masculine, and patriarchal Italy, men are told that hitting will prove their worth; "man's reputation [is] based on his toughness and ability to protect his family and possessions" (Cohen

and Vandello 998). Violence may be particularly valuable when men don't have steady work to support their families; their insecurities about failing as financial supporters translates into anger at home. Fathers and sons hit, mothers and daughters endure. Although men are the ones raising their fists, they also suffer harsh codes of masculinity. Men are forced to be emotionally repressed and displace their anger toward women.

Daughters are more influenced by their mothers than they are their fathers. While the son is kept from domestic spaces, the daughter is conditioned to be obedient and domesticated. From a young age, girls are taught the Italian concept of *bella figura*; which translates to “beautiful figure”. More than appearance, *bella figura* is the desire to make a good impression through personality, behavior, opinions. Mothers “pass on their traditional views to their daughters” because ‘traditional’ is not threatening to other people and helps maintain a *bella figura* (Mitchell and Sanson 53). Daughters are taught to be complacent, and to not question any of the injustices done to them or hope that things could change.

Daughters, raised in a different generation than their mothers, find themselves stuck between modern lessons of feminism and the traditional lessons from their mothers. Feminism in Italy has been minimized as a “rebellion of the daughters” (Baranski 104). Women, oppressed their entire lives, become oppressive mothers who expect their daughters to suffer from the same codes of patriarchy, masculinity, and Catholicism. Daughters, as recent history has shown, are increasingly adopting feminism as a tool to fight the oppressive systems meant to keep them stuck in the past. Unfortunately, the divide between modernity and tradition undermines mother-daughter relationships, which should be the most powerful in the family because of the feminine bond. Matriarchy has the capacity to overcome the patriarchy, if mothers and daughters stop counteracting one another and start working toward an Italy that is safe and accepting for both

them and women of the future. The hope is that these women will raise conscious daughters and sons, who in turn will have daughters and sons who are unaccepting of the patriarchal customs that have plagued the country for so long, and will advocate for a future of gender equity.

Personal Experience:

The mistreatment and abuse of women in Italy, documented in this essay, may lose importance and impact when considered as a far-away issue, problems on paper, statistics in books. However, I have suffered first-hand from the intertwined patriarchal institutions discussed earlier in this paper.

There are popular narratives surrounding sexual assault for women. It's supposed to happen when you're drunk with a skirt that's too short, at a fraternity party or crowded club. These cautionary tales were repeated to me throughout my adolescence and I expected that if I were ever to be assaulted, it would fall under one of these specific narratives. Imagine my surprise when sober, wearing layers of clothing, and at a class party, I was sexually assaulted by a professor.

In December of 2015, while studying abroad in Rome, my entire European Politics class was invited to an end-of-the-semester party. I hadn't slept the night before to finish my final paper for the class, but I was afraid that my absence would insult the professor, whom I already assumed did not like me because of his particularly cold demeanor and incessant critiques of my work compared to other students. Exhausted, I had only planned to stay for an hour and then leave to start packing for my departure from Italy in two days. Within twenty minutes of the party, I had texted my mother, "I'm not sure if my professor's being friendly like a grandpa or trying to flirt." Forced to sit next to him because of a lack of chairs, the professor, with daughters over ten years my senior, would occasionally grab my leg or rub my back in response to things I

said in the class conversation. Uncomfortable with the physical contact but also feeling guilty for assuming that the touches were sexual, I talked less in hopes of making myself invisible to him. My uncertainty over his intentions ended when, during a group photo, he violently grabbed my waist and moved his hand to my backside. When we returned to our table, with my chair next to the professor's, he grabbed my hand and tried to forcefully move it to his private area. I silently struggled to free my hand, too embarrassed to ask for help from my classmates. I thought I was safe once I freed my hands and put them in my sweater pockets, but the professor proceeded to move his hands to my private area. Silent, again, I squirmed in my seat as I tried to stop him. A classmate noticed my struggle and looked under the table, at which point he removed his hand and went back to normal conversation. Violated and afraid, I sat and was numb while the class continued their party. I texted my then-boyfriend what had happened, including "...but I can't do anything or he'll fail me. I just want to leave," and asked him to pick me up. When he arrived outside, my professor proposed that I go home with him instead and made me promise him that I would keep our "secret" because the other students wouldn't understand. Confused, desperate to leave, and afraid for the grade I had worked so hard for, I agreed to stay quiet and left.

At first I considered keeping my promise to him. I questioned what had happened, if it was really assault or if I was overreacting and misreading the situation. But when I woke up to an email from him asking me to go his apartment, and was later handed a note from him with his cellphone number and another message to go to his home, I stopped questioning myself. I reported the incident to my abroad and home university before I left Italy, being forced to recount every detail multiple times to strangers, to verify that I was telling the truth. The process was long and I grew increasingly afraid of my professor, a respected author and academic in Political Science both in Italy and abroad, a field I was connected to through my minor in the

subject. After months of repeating myself, I was contacted by the legal department of my abroad university and informed of my rights to press criminal charges, but also immediately told from Denise Connerty, the Assistant Vice President of International Affairs and Education Abroad:

It can take two to three years for the prosecutor's office to start the procedure, and the trial can last another few years before a sentence of first degree is delivered. This process in Italy usually takes 6-7 years. (Connerty)

Not wanting to fight the professor into my thirties, I did not press criminal charges. The professor was released from his position at my abroad university, but continued to teach at John Cabot University in Rome. After the completion of my independent study *Siamo Lei*, with the assistance of my advisor Michèle Longino, I contacted the Political Science and International Affairs department chair, Dr. Michael Driessen, to inform him of the incident on behalf of his students. Despite my warning, the professor remains on the John Cabot website as a listed faculty member.

As someone who is stable, comes from a supportive family, and has studied sexual assault through my minor in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, I was, theoretically, prepared to handle the assault. But I cried that night, and the next night, and in the months that succeeded the incident. I needed therapy and this paper to dissect what had happened and to move forward from the sometimes crippling anxiety. The Italian state did nothing to help me heal. The lengthy trial procedure, supported by the archaic and disorganized state, discourages victims from seeking help and keeps them silent. While assaulters, like my professor, continue on with their lives unaffected, victims struggle to help themselves. I know that privilege of men in Italy is real because I have suffered from it.

My experience in Italy comes as an outsider to the country because of my American passport. However, the problems I have noticed through my personal experience correspond with problems prevalent in the contemporary sociopolitical research and literature in Italy today.

II. Gender and Literature

To understand women and feminist studies, the discourse needs to include men and masculinity. Women do not exist as isolated subjects, but interact and coexist with men every day. To understand the dynamics between men and women in Italy, I will analyze two novels from either perspective: the Neapolitan Novels by Elena Ferrante and *As God Commands* from Niccolò Ammaniti. Ferrante and Ammaniti are considered two of Italy's greatest contemporary writers, and give insight to real social conditions through the fictional lives of their characters.

The Neapolitan Novels are a four-part series including: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave And Those Who Stay* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015). At the time of the Neapolitan Novels' publication, the true identity of the author was unknown. The writer identified herself with the pseudonym "Elena Ferrante," and all that was known about Elena was that she was born in Naples. To fully understand a text, it's important to understand the author, as their perspective influences the perspective of the characters they create. In the *New York Times* article "Who Is the Real Elena Ferrante? Italian Journalist Reveals His Answer," "an Italian investigative journalist says financial and real estate records indicate that the Italian translator Anita Raja — daughter of a Polish Jewish mother and Neapolitan father — is behind the best-selling author Elena Ferrante" (Donadio 1). More important than her name, the investigator confirmed that the writer "was born in Naples in 1953," authenticating her writing on mid-twentieth century Naples (Donadio 1). Although it is

unlikely that Raja's life will be definitively connected to the life of the protagonist, her background confirms an authentic perspective on womanhood in Naples and connects the fictional novels to a real Italian experience.

In contrast to Elena Ferrante's questioned identity, writer Niccolò Ammaniti is well-known in Italy. Born in 1966 Rome, Ammaniti has lived experience with manhood in Italy, that legitimizes his perspective on the novel's male characters living in Northern Italy. It is improbable that Ammaniti has personal experience with all aspects of his characters, like the Nazism of two of the main characters, but it is important to consider that as an Italian man, Ammaniti has had exposure to societal issues. It is fair to assume that his life has given him an understanding of the male condition in the country and the Italian man's societal relationship with gender and social issues.

In *As God Commands*, Ammaniti employs a vulgar but honest style of writing. The unnamed narrator, by using the everyday language of the men, establishes a complicity and intimacy with the characters. By not standing above them as a superior subject, he narrates without judgment. The result is that the reader, despite the characters' issues, establishes sympathy for each of the men. Understanding how each man has come to be the way he is, the reader conflates judgement and empathy, and cannot place the men or their actions into neat boxes of "right" or "wrong." The simple position that the narrator takes in relation to his characters complicates the reader's relationship with the men, and raises moral questions to be considered in this thesis.

Although *As God Commands* and the Neapolitan Novels are fiction, they are given authority by their Italian authors, writing as products of Italian society who were exposed to the

country's societal issues and conditions. In this way, the authors' works can be used as a window into the gendered experience in the country.

III. Ferrante and Gender

Elena and Lila:

The Neapolitan Novels chronicle a sixty-year fictional friendship between two Neapolitan women, Elena Greco (not to be confused with the author) and Raffaella Cerullo, who is referred to by the author and in this paper as Lila. The novels navigate their transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, sometimes together and sometimes apart. The series considers their experiences as Italian women and the implications their identity has on their relationship to each other, men, and the poverty and brutality of their neighborhood. Through their difficult experiences and proximity to intense violence, particularly by men, the girls become women and learn codes of Italian femininity and womanhood. The Neapolitan Novels give insight to two distinct women, but provide a basis for understanding larger, overarching themes of gender relations in Italy, including sexuality, interpersonal relationships, and societal influences.

Gender and Marriage:

In the first novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila marries as a means of survival. She is first pursued by Marcello Solara, a wealthy but violent man she had known since childhood, when she was fourteen. After Marcello proposes the idea of marriage, Lila replies, "...I would never be engaged to you even if you tell me you'll kill me" ("Brilliant Friend" 185). Her family, poor and struggling throughout the novel, adamantly try to convince Lila to marry Marcello for, "... not only her future but the future of the whole family" ("Brilliant Friend" 206). Against Lila's

wishes, her family invites Marcello into their home and happily accept his bribes, veiled as gifts, like a television and good wine, which they perceive as a promise of, "... a future without anxieties" ("Brilliant Friend" 234). When Lila maintains her position that, "... rather than be engaged to Marcello Solara and marry him she would go and drown herself in the pond," both her father and Marcello react violently ("Brilliant Friend" 207). Lila's father, Fernando, insists that "I know what's best for her [Lila]" and threatens to kill Lila for acting rudely toward Marcello, even threatening his son, Rino, for defending his sister Lila's choice to reject a man she does not love ("Brilliant Friend" 251). The head of the household, Fernando protects his paternal authority over the lives of his family through violence, as he learned in his Neapolitan neighborhood. Similarly, Marcello tries to secure love through intimidation and brutality. Lila observes that, "...Marcello, who, although she hadn't accepted him, felt increasingly that he was her fiancé, in fact her master" ("Brilliant Friend" 228). Marcello's delusions become violent when he tells her, "Well, if I find out that you like someone else, remember I won't merely threaten you, I'll kill you" ("Brilliant Friend" 228). Both Marcello and Fernando succumb to Naples' culture of violence as a means of securing what they want and need. The poverty of Naples forces women and, particularly, men to survive by any means necessary, which is often translated through physical violence. The family unit is a guarded space against institutional problems in the city, which explains Fernando's need to maintain control over his daughter and Marcello's desire to start a family with a woman he believes will help him create a strong family and legacy. The issue is that the men, feeling privileged by Italy's patriarchy, feel entitled to Lila's future. Both attempt to make decisions for Lila without consulting her, and prioritize their own agendas over Lila's wellbeing.

Trapped by the male violence toward her life and without any autonomy to make her own decisions, Lila confides to her best friend that she is afraid and desperate. Solidifying their friendship and pact to protect one another, Elena tries to defend her friend from the forced marriage. Elena says:

I encouraged her to fight that new war against her father and swore I would support her, even if he [Fernando] had already lost his composure and now was threatening her, saying that for her own good he would break every bone in her body if she didn't accept a proposal of that importance. ("Brilliant Friend" 207)

Unfortunately, Elena became too involved in her studies and travel to support Lila, who had limited life options because of her lack of education.

Lila, whose parents did not allow her to continue the education she thrived on, was confined to the neighborhood and her responsibilities to work and help support her family. Elena, conversely, was allowed to continue her schooling with her parents' assistance, becoming a star pupil in Lila's absence. It was her education that gave her an opportunity to leave the neighborhood, a privilege neither her parents nor Lila were afforded, to travel to the Italian island of Ischia through the connection of the girls' childhood teacher, Maestra Oliviero. In this way, education became the first of many life opportunities to create space and difference between the friends. While education allowed Elena a future of independence and security, Lila needed to marry to secure her reputation and financial well-being. Unwilling to marry Marcello but accepting her situation of needing to marry someone, Lila agrees to marry another man, a grocer with prospects for success named Stefano Carracci. When Elena asks Lila, "You would become engaged to Stefano just to get Marcello out of your house?", Lila hesitates before saying

yes (“Brilliant Friend” 244). For Lila, a marriage she could arrange for convenience was better than a marriage forced by her family and Marcello because it gave her control in the situation.

And so, Lila accepted her transition from being someone’s daughter to being someone’s wife. As Elena continued her life as a fifteen-year-old student, Lila prepared for marriage. Lila’s family accepted the marriage because Stefano promised to help build their shoe business and save them from a life of poverty and struggling. Marcello threatened to kill Lila and her fiancé after she tells him the news, but represses tears as he admits, “I love you too much, I can’t do it [kill her]” (“Brilliant Friend” 252). The person most affected by the decision was Lila. The exceptionally intelligent and creative girl disappointed Elena when she abandoned her dream of designing shoes for the engagement. Elena observes:

Lila established herself in the role of Stefano’s fiancée. And even in our conversations, when she had time to talk, she seemed satisfied with what she had become, as if she no longer saw anything beyond it, didn’t *want* to see anything beyond it, except marriage, a house, children” (“Brilliant Friend” 271).

Marriage became the second point of divergence between Lila and Elena. The girls had enjoyed reading and studying together, but Lila abandons her identity as over-achiever and trades in books for fashion and wedding planning. Lila seemingly loses herself to Stefano and becomes a part of him instead of developing herself. She gives up hope in a life outside of the home, but demands that Elena continue her education to avoid being in the same situation. Lila tells Elena, “No, don’t ever stop: I’ll give you the money, you should keep studying” (“Brilliant Friend” 312). With high hopes for Elena, Lila confines her future to her fiancé, content with a life far from the poverty she grew up with, and trusting that his kindness during their engagement will continue into their marriage.

On her wedding day, Lila is sixteen-years-old and, according to Elena, looked like someone, “who has a role and will play it to the utmost” (“Brilliant Friend” 329). With one a Mrs. and the other a Miss, the girls enter completely different spaces. Lila became legally bound to Stefano, who although loving and kind toward Lila during their engagement, violently changes after their vows are exchanged. Despite swearing to Lila that he would prevent Marcello from attending their wedding, Marcello not only attends their reception, but does so while wearing the hand-crafted shoes she had given to her husband early in their engagement, confirming that Lila meant less to Stefano than money and success.

Sexualized and Gendered Violence in Ferrante:

Sexual assault and gendered violence are pervasive throughout the Neapolitan novels and reinforced by the characters. The first instance is with Ada Cappuccio, the poor daughter of a widowed and troubled mother, when she is only fourteen years old (“Brilliant Friend” 113). Ada, described as beautiful with “her long, straight legs, and breasts even largen than mine [Elena]...” is targeted by the Solara brothers, Marcello and Michele (“Brilliant Friend” 113). The brothers, who came from the wealthiest family in the neighborhood, were not shy about flaunting their wealth or using it to intimidate and gain power over people in the community, particularly the women. After unsuccessfully trying to get Elena in their car, the men forcefully took Ada:

The Solara brothers made some vulgar remarks to her, Michele grabbed her by the arm, opened the car door, pulled her inside. They brought her back an hour later to the same place, and Ada was a little angry, but also laughing. (“Brilliant Friend” 113)

Although not explicitly described, the reader can assume that the brothers elicited sexual favors from Ada. The men, “Marcello, who was around twenty, and Michele, just a little younger,” had

an unfair power dynamic with the girl because of their age and wealth, and the fact that there were two of them. The brothers also took advantage of her weak family structure; with a troubled mother, no father, and a poor brother with little influence in the city's circle of men, Ada was an easy target.

According to Sonja Plesset in her book *Sheltering Women: Negotiating Gender and Violence in Northern Italy*, Ada's reaction is grounded in her identity as an Italian woman. Using the personal narratives of her Italian female interviewees, the author explains the overarching "ambivalence about gender relations" felt by the women. Surrounded by systematic sexism, the women felt resigned toward their situation as women and accepted mistreatment as a condition of their gender. As Anushay Hossain said in her article "Femicide In Italy: Domestic Violence Persists Despite New Laws," "The manner in which the male gaze is an accepted part of life in Italy speaks volumes to where gender relations stand in the country" (Hossain 1). Even though Ada was angry, she had to laugh the incident off, presumably to cope with her lack of power against the two men.

Ada was not the last woman to be targeted by the Solara's. The brothers, hypermasculine and hypersexual, defended their manhood and reputation with force and lies. When Lila rejected Marcello's marriage offer, he tried to hurt the woman who hurt him. Marcello spread a false rumor that Lila "gave him a blowjob every night" to shame Lila's alleged promiscuity while praising his own sexuality ("Brilliant Friend" 271). His lies attempted to maintain his position in Italy's "culture of honor" that "require[s] men to be hypersensitive to insults and threats to their reputation" (Vandello and Cohen 998). Unfortunately, the rumor was created at the expense of Lila's honor. Although neither Lila nor her fiancé Stefano responded or seemed to care, the neighborhood did. Pasquale Peluso, a friend of both Elena and Lila, called Lila, "Whore. I call

her a whore. Lina has behaved and is behaving like a whore” (“Brilliant Friend” 269). The neighborhood did not question the word of a man, Marcello, and was quick to put blame on a woman, Lila.

The most heinous example of sexual violence in the novels occurs on Lila’s wedding day. After the ceremony, the newlyweds engaged in an argument that ended with Stefano slapping Lila in the face and bruising her. Instead of apologizing, Stefano blamed Lila for antagonizing him, saying, “See what you’ve made me do? See how you go too far?” (“New Name” 33). Lila, both physically and emotionally hurt, immediately regretted the wedding and was repulsed by Stefano. At that moment, the “violent slap seemed to her an explosion of truth,” and Lila was convinced that her husband’s kindness during their engagement was simply an act to cover his true, violent personality (“New Name” 33).

Later that night, although Lila voiced her desire to go to bed, her husband demanded that they have sex. When she attempted to escape his advances, Stefano threw her on the bed and pinned her down. As Lila tried to fight him off, Stefano yelled and intensified his aggression:

He repeated that remark [you’re really pissing me off, Lina] two or three times, each time louder, as if to assimilate fully an order that was coming to him from very away, perhaps even from before he was born. The order was: be a man, Ste’; either you subdue her now or you’ll never subdue her; your wife has to learn right away that she is female and you’re the male and therefore she has to obey. (“New Name” 33)

Stefano then beat Lila before taking her virginity through a violent rape. It is important to note that the marriage took place in the late 1950s; at the time, the law, and most of society, did not consider nonconsensual sex between husband and wife as rape (Everhart 685). It was not until

1976 that, “the Supreme Court...held that the rape law applied to marital rape” (Everhart 685). Amy Jo Everhart, the author of the article “Predicting the effect of Italy's long-awaited rape law reform on ‘the land of machismo,’” goes on to propose that “the crime of marital rape is considered by many to be impossible” because “many Italians even today consider marriage a contract in which the husband provides financial support in consideration for housework and sex from his wife” (Everhart 685). Under the Italian law and supported by societal definitions of the time, Stefano was not in the wrong for raping Lila, but rather Lila was to blame for being “difficult” and refusing her husband his right to her body.

The violence may have begun during their honeymoon, but did not end when the trip did. Stefano continued to beat and rape Lila with no intervention from family or friends. When Lila gave her brother Rino and his fiancée Pinuccia Carracci, Stefano’s sister, lies to explain her bruises, “they had all sarcastically believed her, especially the women, who knew what had to be said when the men who loved them and whom they loved beat them severely” (“New Name” 45). The couple’s family allowed Lila to suffer so that Stefano could express his manhood. Elena noted, “So the beatings did not cause outrage, and in fact sympathy and respect for Stefano increased- there was someone who knew how to be a man” (“New Name” 45). Stefano translated his manhood into domestic violence, an issue that is not confined to the fictional experience of Lila.

In a country where, according to a 2010 Eurobarometer survey, “91 percent of Italian women reported that they believed domestic violence is a common occurrence in their country but there was nothing they could do about it” (compared to the 10 percent of general European women), Lila was expected to endure her husband’s violence as a part of being a wife (Nadeau 1). Wife and victim should not be synonymous, as husband and abuser should not be either.

Violence and “Love”:

Examining the majority of the relationships between men and women in the novels, there is a recurrent theme of violence justified by “love.” The normalization of violence by men toward women begins in the childhood home. For example, after Lila’s father throws her out of their apartment window and breaks her arm, Elena calmly explains that, “Fathers could do that and other things to impudent girls” (“Brilliant Friend” 82). Starting with their fathers, girls are conditioned to accept that men have a right to their bodies. As Elena later reflected in her teenage years, “We had grown up thinking that a stranger must not even touch us, but that our father, our boyfriend, and our husband could hit us when they liked, out of love, to educate us, to reeducate us” (“New Name” 52).

Transitioning into adulthood, the girls maintained a relationship with male violence. When Elena’s teenage boyfriend Antonio Cappuccio, the older brother of Ada, becomes obsessive and controlling about their relationship, Elena remains his girlfriend. At Lila’s wedding, Antonio tells Elena:

[If] I discover that you see that jerk Nino Sarratore at school, and who knows where else, I’ll kill you, Lenù, so think about it, leave me here this minute, he said in despair, leave me, because it’s better for you. (“New Name” 23)

Antonio describes his threatened violence as a natural reaction that is uncontrollable. Worried that Elena was cheating, Antonio preferred the idea of killing Elena to losing her to another man. While accounting for individual differences, Vandello and Cohen argue that, “domestic violence might be at least partially a byproduct of culturally valued ideals, norms, and expectations about honor and proper masculine and feminine behavior” (Vandello and Cohen 1008). Antonio’s

violent threats are connected to his personal issues with insecurity about his poverty and his educational disparity to the well-educated Elena, but are also connected to his identity as an Italian man.

Antonio, like Lila's father and the abusive Stefano, was raised in an environment that established and protected inequality between men and women. Men, in comparison to women, are supposed to be physically and emotionally strong. Unable to properly express emotions like love without having their masculinity questioned, the men turn to violence, an outlet approved by society as masculine.

Embodying Femininity:

The relationships Lila and Elena have with their bodies change over the course of the series and exist in opposition to one another from childhood. The narrator, Elena, is as observant of Lila's body as she is of her own, and uses a feminine ideal as a standard of judgement. Beginning from puberty, Elena placed a value on the parts of her body that differentiated her from men and other women who had not developed similarly. When Lila admits that she has yet to begin menstruating like Elena and their friend Carmela, Elena notes, "Suddenly she [Lila] seemed small, smaller than I had ever seen her.... And she had failed. And she didn't know what the blood was. And no boy had ever made a declaration to her" ("My Brilliant Friend" 94). For Elena, and eventually Lila throughout the progression of the novels, the female body is a site of their femininity, a measure of competition between women, and a tool to interact with men.

After her classmate Gino offers ten lire to see her newly developed breasts, Elena describes, "I felt for the first time the magnetic force that my body exercised over men" ("Brilliant Friend" 97). Unfortunately, the girls contend with men for power over their own

bodies, and struggle between attraction and fear in relationship to the opposite gender. For example, when Lila becomes visibly upset over the incident of Ada being forced into the Solaras brothers' car, Elena interprets Lila's anger as jealousy of herself and Ada, who had both been pursued by the brothers. Elena says, "Lila, maybe because she wasn't as developed as we were and didn't know the pleasure-fear of having the Solaras' gaze on her, became paler than usual..." ("Brilliant Friend" 114). This "pleasure-fear" should be considered in relation to Ada's angry laughter after the car incident, an indicator of women's uncomfortable acceptance of the male gaze and the real implications that the gaze may have when men decide to touch instead of just look. It is important to note that Elena understands Lila's rejection of the male-gaze as jealousy, as if the objectification of female bodies is something to be competed for.

Throughout the novels, the female body is presented as a site of both pride and suffering. Lila becomes an example of the complicated relationship with femininity and the body. When she refocuses her energy away from school and toward fashion during her engagement, her former teacher Maestra Oliviero laments to Elena that:

The beauty of mind that Cerullo had from childhood didn't find an outlet, Greco, and it has all ended up in her face, in her breasts, in her thighs, in her ass, places where it soon fades and it will be as if she never had it. ("Brilliant Friend" 277)

Beginning at the end of *My Brilliant Friend* and extending to the rest of the series, Elena describes Lila more through her body, her clothing, and her beauty than the intelligence that so defined Lila during her childhood. The shift does not go unnoticed by Lila either, who is self-aware that she uses her body to compensate for the insecurity about her lack of an education. In this way, Lila accepts the objectification of her body by men because she believes her body represents her claim to value in society.

IV. Ammaniti and Gender

Italian author Niccolò Ammaniti's *As God Commands* is a story of men: social worker Beppe Trecca, friends Danilo Aprea, Corrado Rumitz, Rino Zena and his son Cristiano Zena. In the village of Varrano in Northern Italy, the lives of four men and one boy intersect as they navigate issues like poverty, alcoholism, sexual deviance, and relationships. They each deal with issues surrounding their masculinity and their identity as men in an Italian society. Performing their masculinity in similar ways, the men define themselves through their relationship with their bodies, money, and their power in opposition to women. Throughout the novel, the men struggle to overcome insecurities surrounding their identity as men, and resort to a more violent and hegemonic masculinity when they feel their manliness is in crisis.

The Body:

The men define themselves through their bodies and their bodies in relation to other men's bodies. Cristiano Zena, a fourteen-year-old boy, particularly uses his father Rino's body as an enviable model of masculinity. The narrator explains, "Cristiano, as usual, fell into a reverie as he looked at him [Rino]" (28). As Cristiano admires his father's "bulging muscles...the barbed-wire tattoo around his biceps," he doesn't wonder why he can't look like him, but instead wonders, "Why can't I be like him?" (29). His language connects the body to identity, insinuating that Rino's body is the most important aspect of his person.

Rino confirms the idea of the body as an important connector to identity, but focuses on the body and masculine identity. Toward the end of the novel, he defines his manhood with his genitals. Considering the impact his reputation would suffer if he didn't participate in his friends'

bank heist, Rino wonders, “What if I had lost my balls?” (147). For Rino, his genitals signify important characteristics of being a man, including courage and strength. The male genitals are also an important site of difference between men and women, as they distinguish male bodies as having what females lack.

Repressing Emotion:

There is a recurring theme of masculinity existing in opposition to emotion and the characters reaffirm the idea that real men don't cry. During an argument with his father, the narrator explains that, “He [Cristiano] was close to tears, but he would have rather torn his eyes out of their sockets rather than cry” (73). Cristiano's beliefs can be traced to his father, who protects the rejection of emotional vulnerability when he responds to his son with, “Don't whine like that! Nobody's hurt you, have they? What are you, a little girl? Are you going to burst into tears?” (74). Rino reaffirms the idea that emotions are feminine and that physical pain is the only justifiable reason for male tears. As Noah Brand said in his article “Get Over It. Men and the Cost of Emotional Repression,” men learn from boyhood that, “the single most important thing they must do to perform masculinity, to be a big boy, to be a real man: men must at all costs never show, or if possible never even feel, emotions” (Brand 1). The repression of emotions affects men's relationship with themselves and other people. When Cristiano meets a male doctor he admires, he pulls away to avoid any questioning of his masculinity; “He [Cristiano] felt an instinctive surge of affection for this man, which he immediately repressed” (301).

Violence and Emotion:

Throughout the novel, Rino uses violence and physical force as outlets for his emotions, particularly when he is angry. After being told he lost a contract at work, Rino recognizes the

anger inside of him escalating and looks for a release; as the narrator explains, “To keep calm he [Rino] was going to have to let out a bit of shit. He needed to smash something. Set fire to that fucking hut” (56). Rino finds his outlet with his boss, the person responsible for the contract issue, and mercilessly beats and chokes the man.

Rino is particularly tormented after he finds Quattro with the dead body he murdered. Disgusted at the murder and furious at Quattro, but sympathetic because of their friendship and Quattro’s history of mental issues, Rino is described as animalistic. The narrator describes the scene: “‘Don’t cry, you bastard [Quattro]. Don’t cry or I’ll kill you.’ Rino raised his head like a coyote howling to the moon...” (215). Refusing to let Quattro cry, Rino releases his own anger by beating his friend, threatening to shoot him with his gun, and attempting to throw a stone that is so heavy, it causes a brain hemorrhage.

Rino carries his aggression into his relationship with his son, Cristiano. The father and son love one another, but frequently express that love violently. One morning before school, Rino “put the barrel [of his gun] to his [Cristiano’s] forehead,” and agreed to let go, “Only if you [Cristiano] give me a kiss” (30). When Cristiano does give his father a kiss on the cheek, Rino “yelled out in disgust: It’s true! My son is a faggot!” but then tickles Cristiano, intermingling affection with aggression (30).

Controlling Women’s Bodies:

Although the novel focuses on the relationships between men, the men do interact with various women. One of the most important women in the novel is one not physically present in the men’s lives: Cristiano’s mother. The reader never meets the mother, Irina, but she is characterized by Rino and Cristiano. When Irina became pregnant with Cristiano, a pregnancy

she did not want, she expressed her desire for an abortion to Rino; “I want an abortion...I’m too young, Rino...I want to live” (92). From what is revealed from the flashback of Rino’s boss, Enrico Sartoretti, Irina was pregnant by a man who “brought a son into the world without having the wherewithal to give him a decent life” (62). Despite their age and financial instability, Rino demanded that Irina keep the child and threatened, “You do [have an abortion] and I’ll kill you” (92). Trapped, Irina does give birth, but abandons Rino and Cristiano a few months after her delivery.

Rino’s sentiment toward abortion is not one uncommon in Italy. Despite the legalization of abortions in 1978 with Law 194, many Italians would agree with Archbishop Vincenzo Fagiolo’s comment in a 1933 Vatican newspaper that women have “no right to manage their own bodies as a private affair” (Andall 250). Although not the case for all Italians, there is strong presence of people who believe that a fetus’ life is more important than woman’s autonomy over her body and decisions. In *As God Commands*, Rino was willing to threaten the life of Irina to defend his decision to have the child. Rino takes full responsibility for the life of Cristiano and demands that his son recognize what he did for him; as Rino tells Cristiano, “Come here at once and kiss your God. Remember that without me you wouldn’t have existed, and if I hadn’t been around your mother would have had an abortion, so kiss this Latin male” (29).

Irina carried her pregnancy to term but, even if Rino hadn’t threatened her, she would have had difficulty having an abortion anyway because of Law 194 and the morally objecting doctors who were described earlier in this thesis.

Relationships with Women:

The social worker, Beppe Trecca, also has issues navigating his emotions toward women. Beppe claims to be madly in love with Ida, a married woman he called his best friend, but speaks degradingly toward her when she returns his affection. After Ida agrees to meet Beppe, he exclaims, “The horny bitch! So she had enjoyed it!” (104). The derogatory tone toward woman is not specific to Beppe, but is shared by all the men in the novel. There is little dialogue between men and women, so the comments are either thought or said in all-male spaces.

Rino speaks the most about women, with almost all his comments negative. He, who is not shy about his heterosexuality, refers to the women he sleeps with as “stupid cows” and “slags” (33). The narrator describes Rino’s sexual objectification of women by saying, “He would put his mark on them, then kick them out the next morning with their pussies on fire and a few bruises” (33). Much of Rino’s hostility toward women centers around issues of money and power. Rino speaks angrily about women who “marry a rich businessman and end up driving around in a Mercedes” and women who “sleep with some asshole who had a bit of power just so they could get out of the house” (33, 86). His hostility toward women who sleep with rich and powerful men might stem from his insecurity about his own class standing, and his inability to offer women what other men can. His anger may also stem from jealousy of women who improve their circumstances while he suffers in poverty. Rino, who was raised in an orphanage and works to live just on the margins of the poverty level, may have difficulty reconciling the hegemonic “breadwinner” definition of a man with his reality living in financial insecurity.

The concerns of father were passed to son, as Cristiano also worries that women only like men with money. The narrator explains, “His father was right – girls like that only liked rich guys.... Their motorbikes. Their money. If you were poor, like he [Cristiano] was, they just took

the piss out of you” (117). Both Rino and Cristiano suffered anxiety that their poverty invalidated them to women, negatively impacting their claim to being real men.

Danilo Aprea confirms the idea that money can confer legitimacy on manhood, particularly in relation to women. Danilo devises a plan for a bank robbery to be executed by him, Quattro, and Rino, convinced that if he had money, “his wife would come back to him...” (32). Despite his ex-wife Teresa announcing her pregnancy with her new husband and making clear her disinterest in rekindling their marriage, Danilo fixates on the idea that money will be enough to win her back. Danilo thinks to himself, “he’s [Teresa’s new husband] been useful to her because he’s got a bit of cash and he’s got her pregnant. Period. But when you come along with the boutique and some real money, she’ll come back to you” (217). His obsession with money ultimately leads to his death, as he is fatally wounded from the impact of the car and the ATM; the narrator describes his death by saying, “He fell down and death took him on the ground, in the rain, as he laughed and moved his fingers, gathering his money” (252).

The experiences of Rino, Cristiano, and Danilo can be explained with Dr. Baris Cayli’s article “Performance matters more than masculinity: Violence, gender dynamics and mafia women.” Although Cayli focuses on the mafia, his research can be applied to a more general male experience with masculinity in Italy. Cayli writes, “masculinity, as a cultural pattern “has as much to do with seeking the approval of men, as it has to do with obtaining the approval of women” (Cayli 37). The identity of masculinity relies heavily on appearance, and how others see and define you. Men look toward other men, but particularly women in the case of heterosexual men, for validation of their manhood. Women allow heterosexual men to become husbands and fathers, which legitimizes them to the Italian state and in society as men who have made contributions to the community with their family. Marriage and fatherhood also allow men

an outlet to have control over other people, which strengthens their self-image as autonomous and powerful men.

Sexual Violence:

There is only one instance of sexual violence in the novel, but it is brutal and, ultimately, deadly. Quattro Formaggi, through the fog of mental illness that plagued him his entire thirty-eight years, fades in and out of reality when he sees the fourteen-year-old Fabiana Ponticelli alone at night. He recognized that it was the “little girl” he had been infatuated with since he saw her touching another man sexually, but began to confuse her with Ramona, the pornstar from the pornographic video he watched every day (176). Pretending to be dead, Quattro tricked her into getting off her motorbike to help him before he attacked. Quattro recognized that he was hurting the girl, but his sympathy was confused by his sexual desire. The narrator explains:

But there was something he couldn't understand. On the one hand he so pitied her, he was sorry, but on the other he enjoyed seeing her suffer. It was an agreeable sensation. He felt like a lion and could have fought anyone. His cock was stiffening and pressed against his belly. (191)

The two continued to violently battle until Fabiana, bleeding profusely and unable to see, stopped fighting. Fabiana imagined her best friend Esmeralda telling her, “Let him do what he wants! Better to be raped than raped and beaten to death” (193). Unfortunately, Quattro is unable to maintain an erection and complete his sexual fantasy, and his frustration prompts him to murder Fabiana by smashing her head with a rock.

At the time, Quattro did not have the mental capacity to understand that his murder stemmed from his anger at himself, but he later is filled with “immense terror” as, still at large,

he listens to a professor of criminology analyze the rape and murder in a television interview. As Quattro sat and listened, Professor Gianni Calcaterra explained:

The first thing to say is that rape is always the result of a man's problematic relationship with his own sexuality.... Rape arises from a feeling of impotence and inadequacy with respect to the world in general and the female universe in particular. It is likely, in the case of Fabiana Ponticelli, that the rapist killed the girl because he failed to get satisfaction during the rape. (392)

Quattro had fantastical expectations of the character Ramona that Fabiana, a real and nonconsenting girl, could not fulfill.

Quattro Formaggi's rape can be seen as a response to a crisis in his masculine identity. Suffering from mental and physical handicaps, Quattro's life is marked by torment and ridicule from others, particularly men who used their strength to belittle him. Rino, a lifelong friend and protector of Quattro, recognized the danger of Quattro's dormant anger before the rape occurred. The narrator explains Rino's thoughts by saying:

That half-smile he gave after someone has imitated him and called him a spastic wasn't a sign that Quattro Formaggi was a saint, but that the insult had hit home, had pierced a sensitive part, and the pain went to swell a part of his brain where something tainted, twisted, was pulsing away. And some day, sooner or later, that festering thing would wake up. (213)

Quattro, feeling continuously emasculated by society, used the rape to take control for once and exert himself over another person. The rape, although largely fueled by his delusions, was also the product of wit and physical strength; Quattro had to think quickly and smartly to devise a

plan to get Fabiana to stop her motorbike, and he used muscle to win the fight against Fabiana, who battled intensely for her life. It is only after the rape and murder that he transforms into the “Carrion Man,” an alter ego he creates for himself to move away from the nickname Quattro Formaggi, which originated as a joke about his love for pizza. The word “carrion” means dead or rotting meat, which may signify Fabiana’s dead body or Quattro’s own body, which had signs of internal bleeding after a beating from Rino as punishment for the rape and murder. Either way, the Carrion Man can be seen as a proclamation of power to the world, power which he took for himself from the victim Fabiana.

V. Masculinity and Femininity in the Italian Context

Simone de Beauvoir, in her foundational text *The Second Sex*, argues, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir 283). The same can be said for men. Women and men are defined in their difference, with men labeled masculine and women as feminine. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are just that: concepts. Neither are biological or inherent to the human condition, as men can identify as feminine, women as masculine, or a person can non-identify with either. With masculinity and femininity not naturally existing, they must be produced and protected by institutions and performed by individuals. In the gendered distinction between masculinity and femininity, there is a presumption of superiority and inferiority, with masculine the stronger of the two identities and femininity existing as the weaker. Although just concepts, masculinity and femininity have had real and serious implications for people. This presumed difference between men and women supports the patriarchy by bestowing men with privileges denied to women, arguing that men deserve greater powers because they are the

stronger sex. For most of Italy's history, and most of the world's history, men enjoyed these privileges without question or competition. As Barbara Pozzo explained in her journal *Masculinity Italian Style*, there is a "clear predominance of [Italian] men in public and private life..." (Pozzo 587) However, with the introduction and continuous empowerment of feminist groups in the country, man's dominance has lost its stability. In response to these threats, men must use more clear embodiments of masculinity to create a difference between them and women.

Masculinity is not biological and, therefore, it is cultural. Men embody masculinity on an individual level through personal choices but there is a societal push for a standardization and homogenization of masculinity. This homogenous masculinity has historically been defined as hegemonic masculinity. Nancy E. Dowd in her article "Asking the Man Question: Masculinities Analysis and Feminist Theory" for *the Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* defined hegemonic masculinity as a discourse that, "recognizes that one masculinity norm dominates multiple masculinities" (Dowd 418). The hegemonic masculinity in Italy works for the patriarchy to reinforce the Italian man's superiority in society.

Considering masculinity in the Italian context, social researcher Sveva Magaraggia described that, "the public sphere demanded that hegemonic masculinity – in order to distinguish itself from femininity – 'free itself from the needs of its own emotions and affections'" (Magaraggia 81). The script created by hegemonic masculinity tells men that emotions are vulnerable, weak, and a thing for women. The issue is that emotions are not gendered, they're a condition of being human. As scholar Alev Çinar argues:

Hegemonic masculinity regulates the female body, and through its regulation, constructs itself as dominant and powerful. By regulating the bodies of women, this dominant or

hegemonic masculinity simultaneously 'legitimizes its power and authority to intervene with regard to bodies, construct the national subject, and dictate the boundaries of the public and the private spheres.' (Vojdik 674)

The National Sexual Violence Center in their article "Global Perspectives on Sexual Violence: Findings from the World Report," confirmed the trend of gendered violence as a means of supporting men's superior status in society. The article found:

Sexual violence is more likely to occur in societies with rigid and traditional gender roles: 'in societies where the ideology of male superiority is strong- emphasizing dominance, physical strength and male honor- rape is more common.' ("Global Perspective" 8)

To stop the use of women's bodies in securing the idea of hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity itself must be dismembered. While difficult to change the opinions ingrained in adults, childhood offers hope for a shift in gender relations in Italy.

Ruspini in her article on education argued that the move away from gendered stereotypes will happen in the country's classrooms. She recognized that:

Perhaps the decline of the old relations between the sexes based on an undisputed male supremacy is provoking a crisis and a disorientation in men, which needs a new capacity for reflection, self-awareness, an in-depth look at the dynamics of their sexuality and on the nature of their relations with women and with other men. (Ruspini 13)

For Ruspini, there needs to be more conversation and less taboo surrounding conversations about gendered relations. With social media and technology increasingly connecting young children and adolescents, their peers become a more popular source of knowledge than their parents. Children need to be taught gender studies and healthy relationships between sexes to create and circulate healthy, non-violent definitions of gender. Moving away from generational influences

and old ideas, there is space for new Italian values and aspirations to be created by the Italian youth.

VI. Conclusion

As recently as February of 2016, an Italian judge overturned a rape case “because the woman did not scream” (Phillips 1). The incident occurred in 2011, when the defendant “threatened to stop providing her [the alleged victim] with work if she did not comply [to sexual acts]” (Phillips 1). While the alleged rape is horrendous, the reaction of the court is also horrifying. The questions put to the plaintiff were victim-blaming, as the court attempted to make her responsible for her own assault when it asked why she responded to the rape without more force. The woman was forced to justify her response, saying, “Sometimes saying no is enough but maybe I did not use the force and violence that in reality I should have used, but that is because with people who are too strong, I just freeze” (“Italy Sex Case” 1). The issue in the case is not her response, it is the alleged rape. A victim should not have to defend her response to trauma. Besides being victim-blamed in the court, the woman is now being criminalized by “charges for slander” against the alleged rapist (Phillips 1). The case was a blatant disregard for the woman and protection of the man.

From the sociopolitical research in this thesis, substantiated by the alarmingly recent case detailed above, Italy should have one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the world, or at least in Europe. However, neither is true. Italy is tied at 47 on NationMaster’s “Rape rate: Countries Compared” list, which considers rape incidents per 100,000 citizens, with 7.6 percent (“Rape Rate”). The European country with the highest rate of rape and sexual assault is Sweden, which has been called the “rape capital of the west” by the Gatestone Institute (Matharu 1).

Despite the statistics, Klara Selin, a sociologist for the National Council of Crime Prevention in Stockholm, argues that the numbers “don’t represent a major crime epidemic, rather a shift in attitudes” (Alexander 1). Selin explains:

In Sweden there has been this ambition explicitly to record every case of sexual violence separately, to make it visible in the statistics. So, for instance, when a woman comes to the police and she says my husband or my fiancé raped me almost every day during the last year, the police have to record each of these events, which might be more than 300 events. In many other countries it would just be one record - one victim, one type of crime, one record. (Alexander 1)

Therefore, Sweden’s high numbers do not necessarily implicate the country as the most dangerous in Europe, but rather highlight the thoroughness of their reporting for sexual assault and rape cases.

Sweden’s position as a Scandinavian country complicates its comparison to Italy in the Mediterranean. France and Spain have similar histories and backgrounds to Italy because they are also located in the Mediterranean, which makes their statistics more comparable. On NationMaster’s list, France is ranked at 27 with 16.2 percent and Spain is tied at 73 with 3.4 percent (“Rape Rate”). The three countries demonstrate that the issue of sexual assault, or at least the cases that are reported, is disparate across the Mediterranean. Sexual assault and gendered violence cannot be considered as a Mediterranean problem, but must be considered by individual country because statistics always require careful analysis.

The comparison of sexual assault statistics between countries has shock value, but the numbers are disputable and cannot be accepted at face-value. The statistics show the cases of assault that were reported, but, as NationMaster noted before the cross-national comparison, “do

not take into account rape incidents that go unreported to the police” (“Rape Rate”). For this reason, statistics can’t be used to understand the magnitude of the gendered problem in Italy, one that may seem dismissible because the numbers are dismissible. The statistics may be low, but they are also unreliable. Selin argues, “you cannot compare countries' records, because police procedures and legal definitions vary widely” (Alexander 1). The low statistics in Italy do not, therefore, imply a lower amount of assault in the country, but may be indicative of the stigma around reporting gendered crime. The discrepancy between statistics and lived experience emphasizes the importance of personal accounts and literature to understand the real situation in Italy, such as those given in Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels* and Ammaniti’s *As God Commands*. The literature from the two authors establishes a foundation from which the reader can understand Italian masculinity and femininity as they affect gender relations and sexual assault in the country.

The Italian state, patriarchal, and reinforced by Catholic gender norms, has historically supported the violence of men against women through legislation. This legislation has not affected all Italian men, as many instances of violence against women cannot be described by the conditions set forth in this thesis, but this legislation has made it easy for men to get away with intent to harm to do bad without, or with little, consequence. This relationship between state and civil society creates an environment where sexual assault and gendered violence are legitimated in Italy. Simonetta Sotjiu, one of ten female judges who serve amongst 410 male judges in the Italian Supreme Court, explained, “The law is solidly in the hands of men...Many of them think in a way that is completely detached from reality” (Stanley 1). With this considered, the solution for bringing an end to gendered violence in Italy is not likely to come from only men. However, men cannot be excluded from the solution because they are a part of the problem.

Italian women, despite all the conditions set forth in this thesis, have proven themselves to be powerful agents of change. Feminist groups, from the 1944-founded *Unione Donne Italiane* to the more modern *Liberazione della donna*, have persevered through fascism, violence, and opposition from the church, the state, and the home. They are the reason why women were granted suffrage in 1945, forcing the state to acknowledge them as equals. They are the reason why laws surrounding sexual violence and domestic abuse have had referendums. These feminists have not abandoned their identity as Italians for feminism, but are actively working to unite the two. Although many are Catholics, mothers, and wives, they understand the importance of fighting for the social, economic, and political freedom of women in the country.

For society to change, Italian law, education, and economics must change. There needs to be a shift to an equitable representation in the state, to end the fraternal protection of men who have done harm to women. Schools need to include and prioritize gender studies, to change the codes of femininity and masculinity that have been passed down through generations and that protect man's privileged position in society. The government needs to help alleviate the high unemployment rates to avoid male citizens displacing their anger toward women. Italian children need to circulate progressive ideas within their friend groups, and push back against their parents' traditionalism. In 2017, alleged victims should not be told to scream louder to avoid sexual assault. Men need to be told, and shown through the law, that they should not and cannot attack the physical and mental wellbeing of women. Just as men have historically had an impact on the condition of being a woman in Italy, women need to be a part of the conversation of what it means to be an Italian male.

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