

Vergil's Bacchants in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

Much has been written on the importance of Vergil's *Aeneid* in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy, and especially on the significance of Vergil's Dido therein. Scholars have examined Dido's import from the point of view of feminist re-casting of epic (Pache, Bady), absence (Bellei, Geue), abandonment (McCarter), as well as the relationship between Dido and Carthage as compared to Elena and Lila's relationship with Naples (Ricciardi). In this paper, I propose to probe further the connections between Ferrante's Neapolitan novels and Vergil's women through an examination of the bacchic element. In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Elena's husband, the classicist Pietro Airola, is writing a book on bacchic rites. Given the prominence of the bacchic motif in relation to women in the *Aeneid* (e.g., Dido, Amata, Helen; see Panoussi 2009), I believe that Pietro's book topic provides a window into an important aspect of the tetralogy's deployment of Vergil in service of its feminist agenda. Bacchic rites in Greece and Rome allow women to venture in the realm of the wild in a (usually) temporary and benign negation of societal roles, especially those of wife and mother. Elena and Lila both leave their husbands and are uneasy in their roles as mothers. Although Pietro's research focuses on bacchic rites, where resistance to marriage is paramount, he is oblivious to his own wife's resistance to her roles as wife and mother and is completely surprised when she leaves him. Ferrante creates great irony in implying that he does not in fact understand bacchic behavior. The paper discusses the importance of the bacchic characterization of Vergilian heroines, especially Amata, in the portraits of Lila and Elena, arguing for the significance of a seemingly minor detail, Pietro's book, in our understanding of the tetralogy's major themes.

Works Cited

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