

Troubling Virgilian Comedy in Ferrante's Naples

The reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet occupies a dynamic niche in the rapidly expanding field of Ferrante scholarship. Previous studies have looked at how the tragic intertextuality of Virgil's Dido and Aeneas maps onto the story Elena Greco gives of her and her brilliant friend Lila's coming-of-age in 1950s Naples (see Ricciardi, Pache). These scholars however do not question how the marked choices of the translator Ann Goldstein direct such tragic readings of Ferrante after Dido and Aeneas. When Elena in the first book *L'amica geniale* ('My Brilliant Friend') writes a middle school essay on Virgil's *Aeneid*, Goldstein renders her essay prompt *le varie fasi del dramma di Didone* as "the various phases of the **tragedy** of Dido" (my emphasis, 124). Ferrante's Italian text however does not immediately suggest tragedy with the more capacious term *dramma* ('drama') instead of *tragedia* ('tragedy'). Taking a cue from the Italian and the resurgence of scholarly interest in Virgilian comedy (see Hanses), I question what happens if we read Elena's Naples in the comic mode. In this paper, I will argue that Ferrante troubles the generic margins of Virgil's Dido and Aeneas through Elena inscribing comic scripts in Naples.

The first part of my paper will trace the genealogy of comic readings of Dido and Aeneas from Terence's *Eunuchus*; a locus of comparative readings of Virgil since Servius and Donatus (see Hanses, Feltovich, and Caston). Terence's comedy, similar to Ferrante's novels, foregrounds female friendship and multivalent forms of erotic subjectivity beside the repetition-compulsion of traumatized women (see Ricciardi, Feltovich, James). The infamous scene of sexual violence and the belated account of rape at the center of *Eunuchus* exemplifies what I term 'troubling comedy,' or violent irruption of tragic material into a comic narrative. What makes *Eunuchus* a

comedy is Terence's adherence to stock characters and the marriage plot of New Comedy; even as his characters critique generic tropes (see Caston). While Servius and Donatus delineated comparisons between Dido and Terence's *adulescentes amans* Phaedria based on lexical similarities in their monologues ('En quid ago?' see Hanses), I want to extrapolate the *comicus stilus* to the paratragic appropriation of Virgil's Dido and Aeneas by Elena and Lila as a motif for troubling love during their adolescence.

In the second part of my paper, I will turn to the troubling comic elements inscribed in Lila's coming-of-age narrative in *L'amica geniale* ('My Brilliant Friend') and *Storia del nuovo cognome* ('Story of a New Name'). Elena's entire Neapolitan Quartet is motivated by the desire to remember Lila and her life in the city of Naples; a recuperative act with intimate ties to the lost (citizen-)daughters of New Comedy. Transmuted into Ferrante's postfascist Southern Italian context, I suggest the generic anxiety of New Comedies around female citizenship and virginity manifests as the school / *rione* (neighborhood) divide symbolic of Italy's North / South, feminist liberation / traditional maternity dichotomies (see Love). Terence's *comicus stilus* appropriated by Virgil also informs Lila and Elena's Dido and Anna- as the paratragic queen of the *rione* and sister-friend turned go-between (*lena*). By reframing Lila/Dido as a woman blurring *virgo* and *meretrix* beloved of local arrogant soldiers (Camorra) and merchants/travelers (Stefano/Nino), I show how Lila exemplifies Elena's thesis of Naples/Carthage being a "city without love." For Naples stages passionate love affairs, fits of rage, and sexual violence which does not resolve in a marriage plot. And Terence's *comicus stilus* and the paratragic Dido and Aeneas allows Elena the narrator to remediate Lila's disappearance as Naples' lost daughter.

Works Cited

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