

## The Dolls' Descent: Finding Persephone in the Novels of Elena Ferrante

Acclaimed Italian novelist Elena Ferrante is a figure of mystery. Her true identity is a secret, but it is obvious from her fiction that she is familiar with academic life, and had some training as a classicist. Her books reveal, with brutal frankness, how women scholars and intellectuals experienced motherhood, female friendship, sexuality, and careers in the changing society of contemporary Italy. This paper argues that Ferrante calls into play the myth of Demeter and Persephone in three of her novels, *The Lost Daughter*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Story of the Lost Child* (the latter two from her Neapolitan quartet), to illuminate these concerns. I look specifically at the symbolism of dolls in the contentious and tragic dynamics of women's relationships with each other and their daughters, and suggest that Ferrante draws on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to cast dolls, lost by their child "mothers", in the role of Persephone. Significantly the ancient Greek word for "doll" (mentioned in various dedicatory epigrams) is often *kore*, which helps to establish this connection with Persephone/Kore. Thus imbued with a mythical quality, Ferrante's dolls, or daughter-substitutes, adumbrate themes of women's anger, self-preservation and struggle that recur in her fiction.

Her 2008 novel, *The Lost Daughter*, makes a missing doll the focus of a complex and disturbing tale of a middle-aged professor, Leda, whose scholarly career has been thwarted by her obligations to her children. Finally free of these constraints when her adult daughters move away she becomes obsessed with a mother and her little girl named Elena who loses her doll at the beach. It is Leda who finds the doll, and "kidnaps" it, while little Elena enacts the grief of Demeter. This action sets up a series of recursively layered correspondences which turn on the mother/ daughter romance epitomized by

Demeter and Persephone, and evoke correspondences with Leda's memories of her own mother, her relationship with her daughters, with Nina (the child Elena's mother), Elena, and of course the doll.

*My Brilliant Friend* (2012), the first of the Neapolitan quartet, opens with two eight-year old girls, Elena and Lila, tossing each other's dolls into the cellar of Don Achille, a local Mafioso. Their act is a form of sacrifice that recalls girls' dedication of dolls in the sanctuaries of goddesses such as Artemis (*Anth. Pal.* 6. 280) and Demeter probably in coming-of-age rites (Elderkin 1930). Their dolls' descents are a profound loss for both little girls, who live in poverty and have only these toys, but it is also a transformative experience. After heroically confronting Don Achille, the girls accept financial compensation for the loss, which they use to buy a book. It is the beginning of a rich intellectual life especially for the narrator, Elena Greco, who pursues an academic career, albeit one that ultimately closes its doors to her aspirations as a classicist. The lost dolls set up a catabatic motif that resonates throughout the quartet, for example when Elena tries to rescue Lila from a hellish sausage factory, a version of Marx's capitalistic underworld. But the full significance of the dolls only becomes apparent in the heart-breaking conclusion of the last novel, *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015) when Elena and Lila are mothers of daughters whom they lose in different ways. The return of the dolls, half a century after their loss, is only partially restorative, just as the return of Persephone to her mother is limited by the permanence of her marriage to Hades.

As Frever (2009) has suggested, feminist fiction often uses dolls to reveal and resist female characters' predetermined subordination in a patriarchal society. Ferrante uniquely fuses this trope with allusions to the *Hymn to Demeter*, which represents the

goddess negotiating a limited form of agency and power within the social systems that enclose her.

#### Bibliography

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