

Subverting or essentialising gender? Performing childbirth in the *figliata* of the *femminielli*

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ABSTRACT: After introducing the singular figure of the *femminiello* and presenting it as a performative identity, bearing in mind Butler's theory of performance, I will focus on the rite of *figliata*, through which the *femminiello* performs the bearing of a child, i.e. the natural act *par excellence*; in order to explore this performance, I will take into account Curzio Malaparte's literary description of the *figliata* in *La Pelle* (1949). I will then retrace the supposed anthropological-religious origins of the *femminielli* in order to try to throw light on the roots, motives and implications underlying the performative ritual under study. This, along with a set of statements taken from interviews with a number of *femminielli*, will enable me to conclude my consideration of *femminielli*, viewing them as performative identities who on the one hand perform and subvert gender and at the same time perform and essentialise it.

KEYWORDS: femminielli; performativity; Judith Butler; Curzio Malaparte's *La Pelle*; maternity.

1.

I would like to begin with a quotation from the 1960s' romantic comedy *It started in Naples*, starring Clark Gable and Sophia Loren. In a scene from the movie Gable, who plays an American lawyer staying in Naples and Capri, overlooks a square full of people and says:

This place certainly had every nationality and every sex, including some I never heard of. [CECCHI D'AMICO 1960]

Although we cannot be sure if it refers to a *femminiello*, the quotation is significant because of the link it stresses between the bay of Naples and the presence of a singular expression of sex in it,¹ which brings us to this singular figure. Who is the *femminiello*? By looking at existent studies addressing the subject from anthropological, ethnographical and psychological

¹ On *femminielli* as a phenomenon peculiar to the Neapolitan context please see ZITO and VALERIO 2010; 2013, VESCE 2017, MAURIELLO 2018.

perspectives, including interviews with several *femminielli*,² the present paper aims at exploring the figure of the *femminiello* with a focus on the ritual of the *figliata* and its performative aspects and implications.

Deeply-rooted in Neapolitan social and cultural tradition, the *femminiello* or *femminella*³ is a complex identity who, conventionally defined as an effeminate homosexual man acting and dressing as a woman (usually a prostitute),⁴ intersects with different classifications: transgenderism, Mediterranean homosexuality, cross-dressing, third gender, and others.⁵ What makes this identity so special is the fact that *femminiello*, perhaps because of their strong relation with their geographical context, is a historically recognised social figure who has generally not been subject to discrimination by the masses surrounding them, or certainly not to the extent that other LGBTQI+ identities have. The most striking evidence of this “inclusion” was when, in September 1943, during the so-called “Quattro Giornate”, the *femminielli* fought at the side of other Neapolitan partisans in order to free the city from the Nazi-fascists,⁶ which happened just one day before the arrival of the American Allies.⁶ Embedded, as we have said, within the Neapolitan urban fabric, and in particular within those areas inhabited by the populace, the *femminielli*, as Vito states, are part of the ecology of that specific context (ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 27). Not only are the *femminielli* accepted and incorporated into everyday neighbourhood life, but because of their indeterminate nature which escapes classification, they are regarded as sacred, and at the same time profane, figures, and are said and thought to bring good luck; it is their ambiguity that

² In particular those included in ZITO and VALERIO 2010; 2013.

³ On the different use of these two terms see MAURIELLO 2018: 10; on a detailed study of the term and its uses see Vesce who refers to the term *femminella* as an umbrella term (VESCE 2013: 70-78; 2017: 37-46).

⁴ In their seminal work “Le mariage des femminielli à Naples” Simonelli and Carrano (1983) describe *femminielli* as follows: “I *femminielli* sono uomini che “vivono” e “sentono” da donna: abbigliati e truccati da donna. Spesso “prostitute” ma non necessariamente: ogni vicolo ha il suo *femminiello* accettato dalla comunità. Questi può vivere nella famiglia d’origine, attende alle occupazioni tradizionalmente riservate alle donne: cucinare, cucire, lavare la biancheria, fare le pulizie” [Femminielli are men who “live” and “feel” as women do: dressed and made up like women. Often “prostitutes” but no necessarily so: every back street has its femminiello accepted by the community. They may live in their family of origin, carry out activities traditionally reserved for women: cook, sew, do washing and cleaning].

⁵ See CECCARELLI 2010, ZITO and VALERIO 2010; 2013, D’AMORA 2013, LOMBARDI SATRIANI 2014, BERTUZZI 2015, MAURIELLO 2013; 2017, VESCE 2013; 2017.

⁶ See Mastrodonato’s article in *L’Espresso* (2017).

bestows on them a set of values and powers of a magical-sacred order (D'AGOSTINO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 93). This profane sacredness and, again, their embedding within the Neapolitan urban and cultural milieu, is shown by the fact that we can find miniature handmade reproductions of the *femminielli* in the Neapolitan presepio, not far from Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus himself.

Following JUDITH BUTLER's understanding of gender as a performance as presented in her pivotal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *femminielli* can be considered as performative identities,⁷ since their essence and their belonging to the singular gender they express lie in a series of "acts, gestures, enactments" which are repeatedly performed (BUTLER 1999: 172).⁸ The daily performance the *femminielli* display "through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (BUTLER 1999: 172), such as wearing skirts and makeup, taking care of household chores or speaking with a high-pitched tone in order to reproduce a woman's voice, is complemented by a set of singular performative events or rituals.⁹ Some of these coincide with fundamental social ceremonies like marriage, *o' spusarizio*, and childbirth, *a' figliata*; while others are related to the afore-mentioned profane sacredness as one of the *femminielli*'s main features, and these are the so called *tombolata dei femminielli*, in which the *femminielli* conduct the characteristic Neapolitan raffle known as *tombola*, and the *juta dei femminielli*, that is their annual pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Montevergine in order to pay homage to the Madonna of Montevergine, also called "Mamma schiavona", on the day of the Candelora. These rituals – and let us recall that according to Butler "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual" (BUTLER 1999: XV) – underlie "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (BUTLER 1999: 179). Through these rituals the *femminielli* fix, permanently display and enshrine their gender belonging (D'AGOSTINO 2000: 41) and, overall, their identity.

7 As Vesce states, it is the gender performance displayed by the *femminielli* that allows them to take on permanently the female role (VESCE 2013: 104). See MAURIELLO 2018: 7-8 on the "performative excess" displayed by the *femminielli*.

8 I will consider the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* published by Routledge.

9 According to the Collins Dictionary a ritual is a "ceremony which involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order" (see).

2.

Among these rituals/events a special place is held by the *figliata*, that is the performance, still practised today, through which a *femminiello* gives birth to a child, thus mimicking what is considered the natural act *par excellence*; by doing so the *femminielli* overcome any categorization and correspondences between gender and sex, displaying them as mere performances.

Femminielli are not the only ones to have performed and/or to perform childbirth. In his 1885 seminal work *Researches into the Early history of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, the father of modern anthropology, EDWARD B. TYLOR, coined the word *couvade* (from the French verb *couver*, that means “to hatch”) to refer to ritual behaviours he observed in certain cultures, which were adopted by the father of a child during pregnancy, labour, and post-partum phase; in particular, during childbearing, the father would dress in his wife’s clothes, take to bed and mimic labour pains. Considered by P.G. Riviere as “one of the traditional problems of anthropological concern” (RIVIERE 1974),¹⁰ the *couvade* and *simil-couvade* have been the custom of the Cantabri people, people in Honduras, Melanesia, Japan, China, India, the Basque regions, and are still practised by indigenous groups in South America such as the Guianas, the Caribs, the Awawakan Guayapé and groups in Brazil.¹¹

If we move from these traditional and indigenous settings to the modern and globalized culture, we still can find practices like the *couvade*, this time performed by women and not by men, in a very special context: I refer to the fictional performance of childbirth acted by the “Wives” in the well-known dystopian novel by MARGARET ATWOOD, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Set against the backdrop of a totalitarian society, it recounts a reality in which all women are subjugated and, since infertility has become widespread, those who happen to be fertile, the so called “handmaids”, are forced into child-bearing servitude, acting as surrogate mothers for the infertile elite couples; when a handmaid goes into labour, the wife who will foster the child also goes into labour and performs what is naturally experienced by the handmaid.

¹⁰ FRAZER 1910 and MALINOWSKI 1927 refer to *couvade* and even XIIIth century travellers noted this custom, including Marco Polo who associated it with Chinese Turkestan in his *Il Milione*.

¹¹ See entry “couvade” in [Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com).

Now, there is a big difference between the childbearing performances just mentioned and the *femminielli's figliata*. In fact, while the *couvade* and *simile-couvade* practices are performed against the background of indigenous cultures, and the childbirth ceremony in *The Handmaid's Tale* is of fictional and, in particular, dystopic, nature, *femminielli* perform childbirth in a real, current, urban and globalized context. It is this which makes their performance unique and which enable us to refer to them as “archaic” – considering their centuries-old existence and archaic origins which we will discuss shortly – and “postmodern” figures (as Zito and Valerio suggest in ZITO AND VALERIO 2010: 28). But first let us see what this performance is all about.

Observing the natural length of a pregnancy, the *figliata* occurs nine months after the rite of the *sposalizio*, the marriage between the *femminielli*. One of the *femminielli* of the newlywed couple acts as the mother and fictively gives birth to the child, usually a wooden puppet with a giant black phallus (symbolizing the roman god Priapus), surrounded by a cheering crowd who encourages the baby's delivery. We can see how this ritual is performed in the passages from Curzio Malaparte's novel *La Pelle* (1949) in which the *figliata* is described¹² – indeed, this literary source is not only a reasonably truthful account of the ritual under study, but it is particularly telling because of the accuracy with which it describes each act of the performance.¹³

Era una povera stanza di pescatori, ingombra di un immenso letto nel quale, sotto una coperta di seta gialla, giaceva, uomo o donna, un vago essere umano [...] Aveva la bocca larga, dalle labbra rosse ombreggiate da un paio di baffetti neri. Era un uomo, senza dubbio, un giovane di non più di vent'anni. Si lamentava cantando a bocca aperta, e dondolava la testa qua e la sul guanciale, agitava fuor dei lenzuoli le braccia muscolose strette nelle maniche di una femminile camicia da notte, come se non potesse più sostenere il morso di qualche sua crudele doglia, e ogni tanto si toccava con ambo le mani, cantando: «ohi! ohi misera me!» il ventre stranamente gonfio, proprio il ventre di una donna incinta.

Intorno al letto, Jeanlouis e i suoi amici si agitavano premurosi e spaventati, come

¹² The reading of the passage should be accompanied by the screening of the extract of Liliana Cavani's filmic adaptation of the novel (1981), displaying the ritual. For a more recent *mise en scène* of a reinterpretation of la *figliata* see Michele Buono's documentary “Femminielli” (1989) produced by RAI (VESCE 2013).

¹³ I resort to Malaparte's depiction of the *figliata* as a cultural document; therefore, its literary aspects will not be taken into account.

in preda all'angoscia che stringe il cuore dei familiari intorno al capezzale di una partoriente: e quale rinfrescava con pezzuole bagnate la fronte del paziente, quale, versati in un fazzoletto aceti e aromi, gliel'accostava alle nari, quale preparava asciugamani, garze, bende di lino, quale si affacciava intorno a due catinelle dove una vecchia dal viso grinzoso, e dai grigi capelli arruffati, con gesti lenti e studiati, in contrasto con l'angosciato dondolar del capo, con i sospiri affannosi che traeva dal petto, con gli sguardi imploranti che alzava al cielo, andava versando acqua calda da due brocche che sollevava e abbassava ritmicamente. Tutti gli altri correvano senza posa qua e là per la stanza, incrociandosi, urtandosi, stringendosi il capo fra le mani, e gridando: «Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!» ogni volta che il partoriente gettava un urlo più acuto, o un gemito più straziante. [...]

«Ohi! ohi! misera me!» cantava il partoriente picchiandosi con ambo le mani nel ventre gonfio, che risuonava come un tamburo, e il tonfo profondo di quelle forti dita di marinaio in quel ventre di donna incinta suonava crudelissimo a Georges (il padre), che chiudeva gli occhi, smorto in viso e tremante, e gemeva «Mon Dieu! ah! mon Dieu!». [...]

Pallido, gli occhi sbarrati, le due mani strette intorno alle tempie, il partoriente sbatteva il capo qua e là sul guanciale, gridando con voce acutissima. Una bava sanguigna gli schiumava intorno alle labbra, e grosse lacrime gli solcavano il bruno e maschio viso, imperlandogli i neri baffi. «Cicillo (la madre)! Cicillo!» gridò la vecchia gettandosi sul letto, e, ficcate le mani sotto le lenzuola, soffiando, facendo schioccar la lingua, sconciamente rumoreggiando con le labbra, stralunando gli occhi, e traendo su dal profondo del seno gorgoglianti sospiri, andava travagliando intorno a quel gonfio ventre, che ora si alzava, ora si abbassava, dondolando goffamente sotto la coperta di seta gialla. Ogni tanto la vecchia urlava: «Cicillo! Cicillo! non aver paura, ci sono io accà» e pareva che, afferrata con le due mani qualche schifosa bestiaccia nascosta sotto le coltri, tentasse di strozzarla. Cicillo giaceva a gambe larghe, schiumando dalla bocca, invocando: «San Gennaro! San Gennaro aiutatemi!» e sbatteva la testa qua e là con cieca violenza, invano trattenuto da Georges che, piangendo e con soavissima tenerezza abbracciandolo, badava a impedire che si ferisse il capo contro i ferri del letto.

A un tratto la vecchia si mise a tirare a sé con ambo le mani qualcosa fuor del ventre di Cicillo, e finalmente con un grido di trionfo strappò, sollevò in alto, mostrò a tutti una specie di mostriciattolo di colore scuro, dal viso grinzoso sparso di macchie rosse. A quella vista, tutti furono invasi da una gioia furiosa, si abbracciavano l'un l'altra lacrimando, si baciavano in bocca, e saltando e gridando si stringevano intorno alla vecchia che, ficcate le unghie nella scura e rugosa carne del neonato, lo andava sollevando al cielo, quasi l'offrisse in dono a un qualche Dio, e gridava: «Oh benedetto! oh benedetto dalla Madonna! o figlio miracoloso!». Finchè tutti, come invasati, si misero a correre qua e là per la stanza, a fare il verso del bambino appena nato, a frignare, a piangere con voce acutissima allargando la bocca fino agli orecchi e stropicciandosi gli occhi con i pugni chiusi:

«Ih! ih! ih! ih! ih!». Strappato alle unghie della vecchia, e passando di mano in mano, il neonato giunse finalmente al capezzale di Cicillo: che, drizzandosi a sedere sul letto, il bel viso maschio e baffuto illuminato da un dolcissimo sorriso materno, apriva le muscolose braccia al frutto delle sue viscere. «Figlio mio!» gridò, e afferrato il mostriattolo se lo strinse al seno, se lo strofinò contro il villosa petto, gli coprì il viso di baci, se lo cullò a lungo fra le braccia, canterellando, e alla fine, con un bellissimo sorriso, lo tese a Georges.

Quel gesto, nel rito della «*figliata*», significava che l'onore della paternità spettava a George: il quale, accolto nelle aperte mani il neonato, si mise a palleggiarlo, a vezzeggiarlo, a baciarlo, mirandolo con occhi ridenti e lacrimosi. Io guardai il bambino, e inorridii. Era un'antica statuetta di legno, un feticcio rozzamente scolpito, e pareva uno di quei simulacri fallici dipinti sulle pareti nelle case di Pompei. Il capo aveva piccolissimo e informe, le braccia corte e scheletriche, il ventre gonfio enorme, e dal basso del ventre sporgeva un fallo di grossezza e di forma mai viste, quasi la testa di un fungo velenoso, rossa e sparsa di macchioline bianche. Dopo aver mirato a lungo il mostriattolo, Georges se lo accostò al viso, appoggiò le labbra sulla testa di quel fungo, e l'andava baciando e mordendo. Era pallido, sudato, ansante, e gli tremavano le mani. Tutti gli si strinsero intorno squittendo, sollevando e agitando le braccia, e facendo a gara per baciare quello schifoso fallo, con un furore che aveva del meraviglioso e dell'orribile. [...]

Il pranzo incominciò. [...] Cicillo appariva assai più giovane di quanto non paresse disteso nel letto. Era un ragazzo di non più di diciotto anni, e bellissimo. Ma quel che mi turbò, fu la perfetta naturalezza dei suoi modi e dei suoi accenti, quella sua aria di attore espertissimo d'ogni gioco scenico. Non solo non pareva intimidito, o vergognoso, della sua strana acconciatura, né della parte che recitava, ma quasi si mostrava fiero del suo travestimento e della sua arte. (MALAPARTE 1997: 1116-1125)

It was a humble room, of the sort one would expect to find in the home of fisher folk. Much of the space was taken up by a vast bed, on which there lay, beneath a yellow silk counterpane, the indeterminate figure of a human being – it might have been a man or a woman. [...] The mouth was wide, and a small black moustache afforded a contrast to the red lips. It was undoubtedly a man – a young man of no more than twenty. Open-mouthed, he was wailing in a singing voice and moving his head from side to side on the pillow. His muscular arms, encased in the sleeves of a woman's nightdress, were outside the bedclothes, and he was waving them about, as though in the grip of some cruel pain which he could no longer endure. Every so often, with a melodious cry of "O miserable me!" he pressed both hands to his belly, which was strangely swollen, exactly like that of a pregnant woman.

Jeanlouis and his friends were grouped around the bed, restless, solicitous and fearful, as if assailed by the anguish that grips the relatives of a woman in travail as they stand at her bedside. One was soothing the patient's brow with soaking

cloths, another had poured vinegar and perfume into a handkerchief and was holding it to his nostrils. A third was making ready towels, gauze, and linen bandages, while a fourth was busying himself about two washbasins, into which an old woman with a wrinkled face and unkempt gray hair was pouring hot water from two jugs, which she raised and lowered rhythmically, her slow, deliberate gestures contrasting with the anguished movements of her head, her profound, breathless sighs, and the imploring looks which she repeatedly directed heavenward. All the others were rushing about the room with never a pause, crossing one another's paths, bumping into one another, pressing their hands to their heads and crying "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" whenever the "mother-to-be" uttered a particularly shrill yell or a groan that was more than usually heartrending. [...] "Oh miserable me! O miserable me!" chanted the mother-to-be, beating his swollen belly with his two hands so that it reverberated like a drum. To George (the father) there was something inhuman in the deep booming sound produced by the pommelling of those strong seaman's fingers on that teeming belly. Pale-faced and trembling, he shut his eyes and groaned – "Mon Dieu! Ah! Mon Dieu!" [...]

Pale, his eyes wide open, his two hands pressed to his temples, the mother-to-be was beating his head again and again on the pillow and uttering shrill cries. His lips were beslavered with blood and froth, and large tears rolled down his dark, virile cheeks, forming beads on his black moustache. "Cicillo (the mother)! Cicillo!" cried the old woman, throwing herself on the bed. She thrust her hands beneath the bedclothes and puffing and blowing, clicking her tongue, making obscene noises with her lips, rolling her eyes, and uttering deep gurgling sighs, worked strenuously on that swollen belly, which kept rising and falling grotesquely beneath the yellow silk counterpane. Every so often the old woman would yell "Cicillo! Cicillo! Don't be afraid. I'm here!" It seemed that she had grasped with both hands some loathsome creature that was concealed beneath the clothes, and was trying to throttle it. Cicillo was lying with his legs wide apart, foaming at the mouth and calling upon St Januarius for help. He kept trashing his head from side to side with blind violence, while Georges made futile efforts to restrain him, weeping and embracing him with utmost tenderness, and constantly trying to prevent him from striking his head against the iron frame of the bed.

Suddenly the old woman began pulling something toward her with both hands – something that came from inside Cicillo's belly. Finally, with a shout of triumph, she wrenched it out, raised it aloft and displayed it to all. It was a sort of monstrous abortion, dark in color, with a wrinkled, red-spotted face. At the sight of it they all became delirious with joy. With tears in their eyes they exchanged embraces and kissed one another on the mouth. Jumping and shouting, they pressed round the old woman while she, sticking her fingers into the dark, crinkled flesh of the new arrival, kept lifting it on high, as if she were offering it as a gift to some god. "O blessed one, blessed by the Madonna! O miracle child!" she cried, while all, like men possessed, began rushing about the room, behaving after the fashion of

newborn babes, screaming and yelling in shrill voices, opening their mouths so wide that they seemed to stretch to their ears and rubbing their eyes with their clenched fists. Torn from the clutches of the old woman, the new arrival passed from hand to hand and eventually came to rest on Cicillo's pillow. He raised himself up and sat on the bed, his handsome, virile, mustached face lit up by the sweetest maternal smiles, and opened his muscular arms to receive the fruit of his wombs. "My son!" he cried, and seizing the monstrosity he clasped it to his bosom, rubbed it against his hairy chest and covered its face with kisses. For a long while he rocked it in his arms, crooning softly, and finally, with a lovely smile, handed it to Georges.

In the confinement ceremony this gesture signified that the honor of fatherhood belonged to Georges. The latter, receiving the new arrival into his cupped hands, began tossing it about, fondling and kissing it and gazing at it with tears and laughter in his eyes. I looked at the child in horror. It was an old wooden statuette, a roughly carved fetish: it looked like one of those phallic images that are depicted on the walls of the houses of Pompeii. It had a very small, shapeless head, its arms were short, like those of a skeleton, with an enormous swollen stomach, from below which protruded a phallus of unprecedented shape and size, its tip like the cap of a poisonous mushroom, red with white spots. For a long while Georges' eyes dwelt on the monstrosity, then he brought it to his face, placed his lips on the mushroom cap, and began to kiss and bite it. He was pale, breathless, dripping with perspiration, and his hands trembled. All the others pressed around him, yelping, lifting their arms and waving them about, and kissing that loathsome phallus with a jealous, frantic eagerness that was both wonderful and horrible to behold. [...]

Dinner commenced. [...] Cicillo looked much younger than he appeared when lying in bed. He was a very handsome lad of not more than eighteen. But what disturbed me was the perfect naturalness of his behaviour and of his tone of voice, coupled with the impression he gave of being an actor with all the tricks of the trade at his command. Not only did he not seem shy or ashamed because of his strange get-up and of the part he was playing, but almost appeared proud of his disguise and of his artistic prowess. (MALAPARTE 2013: 144-149)¹⁴

As we have read¹⁵ the *femminiello*-mother (Cicillo) performs childbirth by mimicking, through a series of repeated gestures and acts (e.g. he repetitively makes his belly rise and fall, and continually bursts into lamentations

¹⁴ I quote the first unexpurgated English edition of *The Skin* (translation by David Moore and published by New York Review Books in 2013), which is the first to have the chapter "The Son of Adam" that includes the passage mentioned here.

¹⁵ In our reading we focus on the performative aspects of Malaparte's representation of the *figliata*; for a more general and descriptive analysis see VESCE 2017: 64-66.

such as “Miserable me”), what a mother naturally experiences when in labor: suffering, endurance, relief, happiness. If *femminielli* generally display what Vesce calls a performance of gynomimetics (VESCE 2013: 80), which literally means “imitation of the feminine” and should be understood, as Zito points out, as a dynamic and active process through which the *femminielli* construct their femininity by means of a complex activity of the body performed within a specific context and within a specific network of relations (ZITO 2018), when performing the ritual of the *figliata*, they engage in a particular type of gynomimetics, which we could call gènemimetics, that is the performance of giving birth.

The series of acts characterising the *figliata* are theatricalised, and often brought to an extreme point so that they can appear incongruous or even grotesque, as Malaparte suggests. The writer also significantly stresses the fact that the *femminiello*-mother seems strongly aware of the performance, of the “the part he was playing”. The acts are also accompanied by music and dancing and echoed by the crowd that surrounds the mother and empathises with her at the point of making appearance of undergoing her same emotions (pain as well as joy). In fact, in order for the performance to be successful, everyone must act their part, main characters as well as audience. In this sense, the *figliata* should be regarded as a collective performance which cannot possibly be accomplished without its audience. Because of its audience, music and dancing, the *figliata* can be defined as a performance not only according to Butler’s definition of making/performing gender (BUTLER 1990), but also following the conventional and theatrical sense given to the word, defining a spectacle that entertains an audience by singing, dancing or acting (Collins Dictionary). In this regard, it must be said that theatricalization is one of main features of this singular ritual, and in general of *femminielli*’s identity; no wonder that, as Mauriello informs us, many *femminielli* were and are artists themselves, actors or singers (MAURIELLO 2017: 60).

Now that we have seen how the *figliata* is performed, we shall seek to retrace its origins and roots. Where does this “mystic and most ancient rite”, as Malaparte defines it (MALAPARTE 2013: 79), come from? In order to answer this question, we must go back to the origins and roots of the *femminiello*.

3.

Although the origin and evolution of this figure are still historically obscure – which is also the reason why scholars refer so much to literary and artistic sources when speaking about them –, some hypotheses have been advanced. Among the three hypotheses Valerio and Zito put forward (ZITO AND VALERIO 2013), I will take up the one which is more directly related to the *figliata* and, in general, to the performative and ritual aspects of the *femminielli*, that is the sacral hypothesis, according to which this phenomenon goes back to a form of religious transvestitism linked to the sacredness of maternity and fecundity, which found its most popular expression in the worship of the goddess Cybele.¹⁶ Cults of this Anatolian mother-goddess spread in the Mediterranean area from the 6th century BC, when they were introduced from Asia Minor into Greece and all the westerly colonies of Magna Grecia, among which what was then called Parthènope and would soon be renamed Neapolis, that is Naples. In Greek mythology Cybele is associated with the cult of Attis. According to the myth, Attis castrated himself under a pine-tree and from that time Cybele, who had made him his priest-consort, allowed in her service only those who castrated themselves in emulation of Attis; these were known to the Greeks as corybants and to the Romans as *galli*. Cybele and Attis's priests were, therefore, all eunuchs. There are many versions of the myth,¹⁷ but what interests us and appears in each of them is the multigendered nature and the connection with fertility characterizing Cybele's cult. What does this have to do with *femminielli* and the ritual of *figliata*?

¹⁶ As Zito points out, "(s)embrerebbe [...] che dal mito di Cibele si siano trasferiti alcuni aspetti della sua ritualità nelle manifestazioni di devozione alla madonna da parte dei *femminielli*, offrendo così il suggestivo indizio di una probabile contiguità tra il travestitismo dei sacerdoti Gal-lae e quello dei *femminielli*" (ZITO 2018). For further reading on the link between the *femminielli* and the myth of Cibele see ZITO and VALERIO 2013.

¹⁷ According to one of the multiple versions of this myth, Zeus was trying to mate with Cybele, who free herself just as the great god was ejaculating: through his exuberant ejaculation his seed reached the earth and hit a stone, thus generating the multi-gendered god Agdistis. Since the other gods were afraid of Agdistis's androgyny, they made him drink a potion which made him fall asleep and they tied his foot to his penis, so that when he awoke and stood up, he ripped his penis off and castrated himself. The blood which spread from his genitals fertilized the earth and gave birth to an almond tree, from which Attis was born directly. When Attis grew adult he was to marry the daughter of the king of Pessinus, but on the wedding day Agdistis showed up driving everyone mad, including his soon Attis, who castrated himself under a pine. Moved by what had happened to Attis, Cybele saved him and made him his priest-consort. Because of this, only those who castrated themselves in emulation of Attis were allowed at her service. See P. Turner and C.R. Coulter's *Dictionary of Ancient Deities* (TURNER 2001: 24).

Many sources, including Virgil, state that there was a temple dedicated to the Goddess on a small mountain near Avellino, a town close to Naples. In order to worship her, men would dress up as women (again, emulating Attis) and engage in a frenetic and ecstatic devotion, singing and dancing to the sound of drums and cymbals (ZITO, SISCO, VALERIO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 46). Later, on that same spot, a sanctuary devoted to the Madonna was built, that very sanctuary of Montevergine where today *femminielli* worship the so called “Madonna nera”. If the Great mother’s cult was thus replaced by the cult of the Madonna during the Christian era, some ritual manifestations of the former seem to have survived and become part of the devotion which the *femminielli* show for the Madonna of Montevergine during the afore-mentioned annual visit to the Sanctuary (ZITO, SISCO, VALERIO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 47), but they have also become part of the *figliata*: on both occasions, we can indeed witness a very singular ritual of prayer, combining fertility rites, transgression and Christian and Marian devotion (DI NUZZO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 146) (see in *The Skin* “the men possessed” and “delirious with joy” surrounding the childbirth). Moreover, if the continuity between the transvestitism of the eunuchs devoted to Cybele and that of the current *femminielli* enables us to view the *femminiello* as a figure which continues up to today the myth and archetype of the androgyne (ZITO AND VALERIO 2010: 40), Cybele herself, who was significantly known by the Romans as Magna Mater (“the Great Mother”) and is said to have given birth to the first gods, points to a link between the performative ritual of the *figliata* – and the characteristic modalities of its performance – and this divine goddess incarnating maternity.¹⁸

Through the performative rite of the *figliata*, the *femminielli* embody and express both the archetype of the androgyne and that of the Mother. A ritual of fecundity enacted by “ambiguous beings”, as Malaparte calls them, the *figliata* is the performance through which the *femminielli* express their femininity in the form of maternity and fecundity, bearing the memory of their cultural Great Mother (and again we read in Malaparte: the old woman “kept lifting it on high, as if she were offering it as a gift to some god. “O

¹⁸ Furthermore, is not without significance that Naples is a city which has always been connected to maternity, bearing the memory of traditions such as the myth of the Great Mediterranean Mother, the cult of Venus, goddess of fecundity, in the Platamone caves of the Chiatamone, Cybele’s rituals (ZITO and VALERIO 2010: 63-64), and of course the story of the Madonna, mother of Jesus Christ.

blessed one, blessed by the Madonna! O miracle child!”). As Zito, Sisci and Valerio write, *femminielli* have perpetrated a ritual and psychological identification with the original femininity, that is the Great Mother (ZITO, SISCO, VALERIO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 48). Going further, we could even say that the *figliata* is the ritual through which the *femminielli* profess their faith towards the Great Mother and also the Madonna by means of a performance of emulation (emulation of childbearing), following the example of what we can call their ancestors, those very priests of Cybele who castrated themselves, emulating Attis, in order to honor her cult.

4.

Now, the anthropological and religious roots we have retraced enable us to put forward a crucial equation upheld by the *femminielli*: femininity=maternity/fecundity.¹⁹ This equation enables us to explore the desire and expectations of the community/audience during the *figliata*, as well as understand the *femminielli*'s current sentiments and motives underlying this ritual performance.

If we consider the community, we can easily deduce that its participation in the *figliata* is connected to those powers of a magical-sacred order early mentioned (D'AGOSTINO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 93), which are associated with the *femminielli* and make them symbols of good luck²⁰ and the depositary of fertility; they are fecund because they produce good luck. In these terms, the *figliata* can be considered as an apotropaic-sacred ritual, known to bring good luck and take away evil influences and, in particular, what in Naples is known as the “evil eye”, the *malocchio*. Also, as in the celebration of the biblical purification after childbirth during the festivity of the Candelora (ZITO AND VALERIO 2013: 109), the *figliata* may likewise be connected to the possibility of a purification from sin and evils. The community-audience attend this ritual as they were witnessing a miraculous event, the bearing of a sacred creature by another sacred and liminal creature (not so different from Christ's birth) from which they can draw good luck and purify from evils.

With regards to the motives and sentiments of the *femminielli*, the ritual

¹⁹ As Vesce informs us, “femminielle act in a symbolic universe in which reference is constantly made to fertility, when not specifically to maternity” (author's translation from Italian to English from VESCE 2013: 69)

²⁰ See MAURIELLO 2018: 8-10.

of the *figliata* gives consistency to the *femminielli*-mother's existence by affirming, and thus consolidating, their singular identity, as well as ensuring their social recognition and belonging to the community. But what does this consolidation of identity mean for the *femminielli* performing childbearing and how is it related to the afore mentioned and crucial equation femininity=maternity/fecundity?

During a series of interviews conducted by Valerio and Zito with the community of *femminielli*, one of them justified not wanting to change their biological sex by affirming:

...vedi io non sono diventata completamente una donna perché sono convinta di una cosa e cioè che essere donna significa essere mamma, allora io non potendo avere una maternità non voglio essere donna a tutti gli effetti perché non avrebbe senso, e allora per quelle parti lì preferisco rimanere come madre natura mi ha fatto, però se io dov[essi] avere la possibilità di avere un bambino dal mio corpo sarei [...] la prima a farlo... (D'AGOSTINO in ZITO and VALERIO 2010: 15)

...you see, I haven't fully become a woman because I'm sure of one thing and that is that being a woman means being a mother; so, if I can't have maternity, I don't want to be a woman in every respect because it wouldn't make sense, and so for those parts I prefer to remain as Mother Nature has made me; but if I had the possibility to have a child from my body I would be the first to do it...²¹

If we read what other *femminielli* say on why they do not want to change sex, we receive similar answers:

...è da pazze farsi l'intervento e poi non ha senso tanto non diventi femmina e i figli non li puoi fare e allora meglio rimanere così come si è. E poi non è vero che se non ti operi sei meno femmina tanto femmina non lo puoi mai essere allora meglio essere come sei senza pensarci troppo e poi soprattutto godersi la vita facendo le proprie scelte [...] pure per questo io ho deciso di non operarmi perché comunque dei figli non li puoi fare e allora tanto vale che rimani come sei e io sto bene così dottore e speriamo di stare bene così ancora per molto [...] perché anche io adesso non voglio questo cambiamento con l'intervento perché già sono e vivo come una femmina. E poi a dire tutta la verità quelle come me non possono mai essere donne completamente perché c'è il problema che comunque non sarà mai possibile fare dei figli e allora che senso ha farsi l'intervento, secondo me

²¹ This and the other passages from the interviews have been translated from Italian to English by the author.

nessuno (ZITO and VALERIO 2010: 100-102)²²

...it's madness to have surgery and in any case it doesn't make any sense because you don't become a woman and you can't have children and so it's better to stay as you are. And in any case it isn't true that if you don't have the operation you are less of a woman, because you can never be a woman and so it's better to be as you are without thinking about it too much and above all to enjoy life by making your own choices [...] and that's another reason why I have decided not to have the operation, because in any case I can't have children and so you might as well stay as you are and I'm fine as I am, doctor, and let's hope that I'll still be fine like this for a long time [...] because now I don't want this change either through surgery because I already am and live like a woman. And in any case, to tell the truth, those like me can never really be fully a woman because there's the problem that in any case it will never be possible to have children and so what's the point in doing the operation, to me none.

They don't undergo surgery because the actual (and not performative) manipulation of their body would clash with an insurmountable limit of their nature, the impossibility of procreating (D'AGOSTINO in ZITO AND VALERIO 2010: 15). Since the *femminielli* adhere to a model which equates the condition of being woman with the condition of being (natural) mother (D'AGOSTINO), the *figliata* is the performance which consolidates the identity of *femminielli* as that of someone who feels like a woman (SIMONELLI AND CARRANO 1983), but can never really be one. In this sense the *figliata* becomes the *mise en scène* behind which an always frustrated desire is hidden: the desire of being a real woman, which to them, as we have said, can be only be achieved with being a mother. And this brings us directly back to Butler and her understanding of the body as a "signifying lack". As Butler writes "The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which is the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show" (BUTLER 1999: 172). It goes without saying that the "signifying lack" displayed by the *femminielli* is their lack of reproductive capacity, which, once again, confines them to their singular (maybe frustrated) identity. In this regard, the attribution of a male sex to

²² Alongside the interviews quoted here, we may add the one carried out by Vesce with two *femminielli* called Nina and Gianna, according to whom only through maternity can *femminielli* fully identify with the gender role they have taken on; therefore the operation reproduces a fake ("fasullo") organ because it is incapable of performing its natural function, that is the reproductive one (VESCE 2013: 103; 2017: 122).

the newborn child (children born from *femminielli* are always boys) and its emphasis expressed through the choice of bearing a wooden puppet with a giant phallus recalling the god Priapus, reiterates *femminielli*'s identity as an identity which performs femininity but is “naturally” tied to masculinity. That giant phallus seems to suggest that at the end of the *mise en scène* is always with a penis that we are dealing.

The belief that real femininity can only be conquered through maternity causes the *femminielli* to fall within a normative consideration of the “female” gender,²³ a belief which is indeed problematic since it strongly contradicts the overcoming and subverting of gender categories which the *femminielli* perform. In the first paragraph of the third chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticises the theory of the maternal body provided by Julia Kristeva in *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974), showing how its focus on motherhood and its ascribing to the woman the role of mother is implicitly governed by a normative and patriarchal gender essentialism (BUTLER 1999: 101-119). Without getting involved in the *querelle* between Kristeva, on one hand, and Butler and the other feminists writers and thinkers who criticise her maternal body theory on the other,²⁴ we can apply the theoretical framework in which Kristeva seems to equate femininity with maternity to the way *femminielli* live and consider their identity. *Femminielli* might then be regarded as performative identities which transform their body and perform through a series of repeated acts and gestures a most singular gender, and at the same time as identities who are tied within their minds and souls to an essentialist and normative way of considering those very same genders they subvert. Do *femminielli* subvert gender or essentialise it?²⁵ With regards to the *figliata* and their views on femininity and maternity, I would say both.²⁶

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²³ Mauriello states that *femminielli* have an irremediably patriarchal model (MAURIELLO 2018:11).

²⁴ See on this matter Fanny Soderback's article “Motherhood: A Site of Repression or Liberation? Kristeva and Butler on the Maternal Body” (SODERBACK 2010).

²⁵ On the *femminielli*'s role in countering the hegemonic discursive order see MAURIELLO 2018:12.

²⁶ By drawing these conclusions we are not implying that *femminielli* embody overall essentialist and normative practices and visions; we firmly recognize the fluidity of this figure (VESCE 2013; 2017). It is precisely this fluidity that enables us to explore the universe of the *femminielli* as one in which multiple, diverse and even conflicting meanings exist together, a universe which is not only performative and *therefore* subversive, but also performative and *at the same time* essentialist.

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