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Naples’s pathological body: cholera, disability, and problematic cures in Matilde Serao’s Il ventre di Napoli

Abstract

«Bisogna sventrare Napoli!» (Naples must be disemboweled!) decreed Italian Prime Minister Agostino Depretis in reaction to the 1884 cholera outbreak. Consequently, Neapolitan journalist and author Matilde Serao chronicled the government’s violent desire to cure Naples’s belly in Il ventre di Napoli (1884-1904). In this article I draw on disability and feminist studies to carry out an intertextual analysis of Il ventre di Napoli through readings of «Parthenope» and «Virgil» from Serao’s Leggende napoletane (1881) and Italian Law 2892, «Per il risanamento della città di Napoli» (1885). I argue that Serao pioneers a discourse in which Naples can be understood not only as a choleraic infected body, but more importantly, as a female body with disabilities that is worthy of attention, visible space, and voice. The concept of disability, while not explicitly named by Serao, is unquestionably present in her close attention to bodies—especially female bodies—at higher risk of mortality due to systemic injustices, chronic illnesses, and society’s violent reactions to bodily difference. Serao, contrasted with the governmental gaze that attempts to «cure» Naples through superficial, and, at times, violent means, does not gaze upon Naples’s body; nor does she restore Naples in the voyeuristic and literary image of her beautified Parthenopean body. Rather, writing from the perspective of a woman author, Serao stares, thereby «creat[ing] a circuit of communication and meaning-making» (GARLAND-THOMSON 2009) in which she and Naples co-construct an embodied practice of enquiry and care that addresses the unjust and inhumane conditions of Naples’s impoverished belly.

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Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cholera epidemics in Naples, like the Covid-19 global pandemic, threatened livability and revealed social inequities. Cholera targeted impoverished neighborhoods in Naples more than anywhere else in this southern Italian metropolis, and more than other European cities (DEPRETIS 1884, 1-3). The bacteria quickly spread through the belly of Naples, a poverty-stricken area in the lower part of the city composed of the neighborhoods Mercato, Pendino, Porto, and Vicaria. These neighborhoods were unsanitary, overcrowded, and lacked the resources for clean water, plumbing, and waste removal. In 1884, Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Depretis, concerned with cholera in Naples as it reflected badly on the nation’s reputation and ability to welcome foreign investors, declared that Naples must be disemboweled,¹ that is rid of the belly’s current dwellings and their inhabitants. Disembowelment was the first step in a governmental plan to cure Naples. The next was Naples’s restoration, mandated by Law 2892, «Per il risanamento della città di Napoli» (January 15, 1885). This plan did not improve life for the belly’s inhabitants; instead, it attempted to recover Naples in the image of her legendary Ancient Greek origins to please the gaze of wealthy male onlookers.

The call to disembowel Naples positions the belly as not only a geographical setting that can be violently emptied of its dwellings and inhabitants, but as part of a metaphorical body since choleraic bacteria is mostly found in the intestines. Understanding the city of Naples as a body is part of an artistic tradition with traces back to the city’s mythical founding upon the body of the siren Parthenope. Naples’s body, then, is often interpreted as grotesque, and thus marginalized out of fear, or beautified in the image of its picturesque landscape to mask that same horror. As Neapolitan author and journalist Matilde Serao (1856-1927) suggests, the government, influenced by this tradition, failed in its approaches to curing the pathological body of Naples.

This governmental failure is not surprising since King Umberto I, Prime Minister Depretis, and even the then Neapolitan Mayor, Nicola Amore, had not dared to venture into Naples’s belly. Serao, however, takes us as readers down into its winding, dark, and mucked-up streets, despite being afraid. Her scathing series of exposés on Naples during and in the twenty years following the 1884 cholera outbreak were organized into a volume consisting of three
sections: «Venti anni fa», a series of chronicles from 1884 that first appeared in the Roman newspaper *Capitan Fracassa*, «Adesso» (1904), and «L’anima di Napoli» (1904). The collection was published in 1906, as a revised edition of *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884), the title of which was influenced by Émile Zola’s *Le ventre de Paris* (1873). The volume centers Naples’s Lower Neighborhoods and their marginalized inhabitants (especially, as Serao refers to them, the poor female class).

In engaging with Naples’s corporeal *topos*, Serao portrays the city as a fractured female body whose digestive and circulatory systems fail; yet Naples still speaks. Thus, in this essay I suggest that Serao puts forth a discourse in which Naples can be understood symbolically as a body with disabilities, and materially as a metropolis made up of bodies with disabilities that is worthy of attention, as visible space and a voice. I argue that by witnessing the belly’s putrid condition and the suffering of its inhabitants, it becomes clear that cholera is not the underlying medical cause of this corporeal decay; rather, Naples exists as a body with disabilities prior to, and continues to be after, the cholera outbreaks.

While cholera is not the cause of Naples’s disabilities, the concept of disability becomes easily recognizable in the choleraic setting. Disability in Serao’s *Il ventre di Napoli* should be understood as simultaneously socially constructed and material. As I will demonstrate, disability is unquestionably present in Serao’s close attention to bodies at higher risk of mortality due to systemic injustices, chronic illnesses, and society’s violent reactions to bodily difference, all of which target Naples’s poor. Disability is most apparent at the intersections of bodies and systems of power. In Serao’s work these systems are primarily those of the government and the church. By recognizing Naples as a body with disabilities, I suggest that Serao’s close attention to Naples at the intersection of disability, gender, and class allows her to interact with the city and its inhabitants. Through this interaction she recognizes the injustices within these power dynamics and responds to them by co-creating with Naples an embodied practice of enquiry and care. I argue that this embodied practice stems from what feminist disability studies pioneer Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called «staring» or «an intense visual exchange that makes meaning» (GARLAND-THOMSON 2002, 9). Despite Serao’s ambivalence towards
women’s movements, drawing on feminist theory aluminates new ways of understanding Serao’s work, as Ursula Fanning (FANNING 2002) has argued. This embodied practice present in Serao’s work bears similarities to feminist understandings of care and disability today, in which caring requires a corporeal epistemology and is reciprocal (BARBUTO and NAPOLITANO 2014; HAMINGTON, 2004).

By «staring» at the city space and its inhabitants, Serao not only places herself in opposition to the superficial and judgmental governmental gaze, but she also alters the classical narrative of the Parthenopean city as an objectified body that falls prey to male violence. This becomes clear when Il ventre di Napoli is read alongside Serao’s versions of Naples’s origin stories in Leggende napoletane (1881). The two origin stories, «Parthenope» and «Virgilio», demonstrate such violence; however, they also attempt to erase violence by diverging from traditional legend. For example, in Serao’s rendition, Parthenope is not the grotesque siren of the Homeric tradition who kills herself for failing to distract Ulysses from his quest. Serao ‘normalizes’ Parthenope’s body by erasing her physical traits that characterize her as grotesque and in so doing, uses Parthenope’s body as a literary tool to challenge tradition. Similarly, Serao utilizes disability as a metaphor for injustices in Il ventre di Napoli. Today, following Susan Sontag’s book, Illness as Metaphor, Disability Studies scholars rightfully question the use of disability as metaphor because it both risks ignoring lived experiences of disability and is often «embedded in ableist structures of thought» (KAFER and KIM 2018, 135). Despite these two examples of morally questionable ways of using bodies as literary tools, Serao’s «stare» leads her to propose measures of care as alternatives to the government’s superficial cures. Instead of creating Naples in the image of her Parthenopean past, as the government attempts, Serao’s proposals for recreating Naples replicate the reciprocal love between Parthenope and her surroundings when Parthenope originally created the city.

Reading Serao’s work in terms of disability builds upon previous scholarship that recognizes Naples’s corporeality in her writing as female (TENCH 1989); that understands Il ventre di Napoli as a journalistic intervention that unveils truth and suffering through Serao’s interactions with the belly’s inhabitants (SNYDER 2012; TENCH 1989); and that positions Serao as...
an advocate for those inhabitants (HAZZARD and OBULAS 2016), especially for the poor female class (BANTI 1965), although at times recognizing that Serao seems ambiguous towards or afraid of these women (FANNING 1993).

Naples’s Bodies

In *Il ventre di Napoli*, Serao mainly describes Naples’s urban body metaphorically in terms of two corporeal systems: the digestive system and the circulatory system. The first, when properly working, provides the body with nutrients and energy to sustain life, while assisting in the removal of waste; the second pumps blood throughout the body distributing oxygen and nutrients. The digestive system is indicated, as Serao’s title suggests, by the belly. The circulatory system is represented by its arteries and blood. Serao describes this body as living, which indicates a basic functionality of these systems. The ability of this body to live is perplexing though, since Serao portrays Naples as a grotesque pastiche of disjointed organs, and yet these organs manage to pass disease amongst them. A body considered less than whole: lacking or flawed is often misunderstood as the definition of disability (GARLAND-THOMSON 2011, 592). In Serao’s text however, the lack of corporeal integrity contributes to understanding Naples in terms of disability as the body’s disjointedness juxtaposes the organs of this urban body, making it impossible for Naples to sustain livability. Naples’s intestines are twisted and agitated, and her arterial system is poorly designed and incomplete. The intestines are the alleys of the Lower Neighborhoods through which waste does not move but collects; they are «vicoletti che precipitano per mezzo di dislivelli paurosi, di scalette ripide, difese da rozze ringhiere, […] vicoletti sinuosi, vicoletti nerii, angoli ove due o tre villi s’intersecano, dirupandosi, tutto un disegno bislacch e grotesco» (SERAO 1906, 95). In contrast to the intestinal alleys, the arteries, trusted with the vital task of transporting blood, are developed streets. Serao describes two of Naples’s primary arteries: the Rettifilo and via Toledo. These two major arteries, however, do not pump blood between each other, as the streets flowing from the Rettifilo go to the Upper Neighborhoods and to the sea, but do not extend into the belly (ibid., 94-5); extending from the right side of the Rettifilo there are only two complete roads, «e tutte le altre sono abbozzate, sono pezzi
The belly as metaphor is obvious within the context of the 1884 cholera outbreak. However, by drawing attention to the unsanitary living conditions in Naples’s belly, Serao emphasizes that the condition of Naples’s body is not a result of the current epidemic, but rather precedes it and causes it; this shifts the conversation from cholera, an illness that is temporary yet deadly when not properly treated, to that of a chronic illness or disability. From the way people existed in the belly, «senz’aria, senza luce, senza igiene, diguazzando nei ruscelli neri, scavalcando monti d’immondizie, respirando miasmi e bevendo un’acqua corrotta» (ibid., 11), it is easy to see, despite the disjointedness of Naples’s body, how disease could spread and threaten livability. Like their inhabitants, within the context of Serao’s metaphor, the Lower Neighborhoods also suffer from cholera. Serao explains that in Porto the stomach spasms, which is a common symptom of cholera. She also describes Porto’s terrain as slippery from choleraic excrement, which appears in the forms of trash and blackened, mucked-up water in the streets (ibid., 7).

Just as the belly’s conditions precede the 1884 outbreak, they persist after it.8 Serao continues to utilize the belly metaphor when writing in 1904. Though there is no active outbreak, the threat of cholera still exists due to the belly’s conditions. Even the excrement metaphor is still relevant, as is evident when Serao writes, «Tutto il letame delle bestie e delle persone e delle case, tutto è qui e nessuno ce lo toglie, qui, sull’orlo della civiltà novella, dietro ai palazzi sontuosi!» (ibid., 112). The continuity in relevance of this metaphor further insists that while the epidemic was ephemeral, the disabilities of Naples existed both before and after. As Serao explains, in 1904, in the rotting intestines people still suffer from infections and drink and wash in contaminated waters (ibid., 132).

While the belly metaphor is related to the cholera epidemic, a second bodily metaphor furthers a description of Naples connecting her body with injustices that precede and follow the 1884 outbreak. Cholera does not directly affect blood, and yet, blood contributes to the description of Naples as a body with disabilities. According to Serao, the blood of Naples is money and material
goods like fabric and clothing, as she demonstrates through representations of two usurers, *donna Carmela* and *donna Raffaela*. Serao writes that *donna Carmela* «vuole il suo denaro, vuole il sangue suo» (ibid., 58), and *donna Raffaela*, who lends clothing and fabrics, yells, «*Chesta è robbia mia! Taie arrobbato lu sango mio!*» (ibid., 60; author’s italics). Since poor Neapolitan women continue to seek out these usurers, such a metaphor suggests that in the poverty-stricken belly of Naples, there is very little blood and hence, a weak pulse; thus, the neighborhoods and inhabitants of the belly must be barely alive. To emphasize this point, Serao describes the «immensa classe povera femminile» (ibid., 16). The female Neapolitan servant is not described as a woman nor a human, but as an «esser[e] mostruos[o]» (ibid., 17):

> Hanno trent’anni e ne dimostrano cinquanta, sono curve, hanno perso i capelli, hanno i denti gialli e neri, camminano come sciancate, portano un vestito quattro anni, un grembiule sei mesi. Non si lamentano, non piangono: vanno a morire, prima di quarant’anni, all’ospedale, di perniciosa, di polmonite, di qualche orrenda malattia. Quante ne avrà portato via il colera! (ivi)

The female servant’s work and living conditions deform her body, cause her to suffer, and shorten her life span. There is a connection between the conditions of her body in terms of ability, health, and economics.

Exploitation of the belly’s inhabitants and the harsh conditions in which they work and live continue as neither governmental nor economic attention and sustenance flows to the belly. Disability, then, as a lack of corporeal integrity within the metaphorical systems of Naples’s body, represents injustice. Serao positions the reader to understand bodies through the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, adopting a Christian understanding of bodies. Serao’s idea of morality becomes apparent as she describes some of the alleyways of Mercato: Cavalcatoio, Sant’Arcangelo a Baiano, and the Seven Alleys of Duchesca, where she explains, «*Io sono una donna e non posso dirvi che sieno queste strade, poiché ivi l’abbiezione diventa così profonda, così miseranda, la natura umana si degrada talmente, che vengono alla faccia le fiamme della vergogna*» (SERAO 1906, 9). Serao identifies as a woman to correlate being a woman with moral standards. There are places in Mercato
where human nature is so degraded that Serao places her moral identity as a woman ahead of her identity as a journalist. This is particularly important when one recalls that Serao, privileged as a woman through education that gains her cultural and financial capital, describes the poor female class as «monstrous».9 As I will briefly explain in the next section of this essay, femaleness and disability are related through their history of being descriptors of monstrous bodies. Serao, then, understands humanness in Naples’s belly in a way that inextricably ties it to morality and bodily appearance, as they are informed by notions of ability, gender, and class. This connection between the physical and the soul, situated on a scale from monster to human, is a Christian one rooted in the Italian literary tradition and Southern Italian communities;10 it also dangerously reinforces a hegemonic narrative of Naples and Southern Italy, in which the southern people are bestial in comparison to their northern, wealthier, and more erudite counterparts. Serao’s understanding of the relationship between morality and body, however, should not only be read as questioning the humanness of Naples’s «monstrous» bodies, but also as questioning the humanness of the seemingly able bodies of the government, the wealthy, and the educated, who mask their degraded morality with privilege in the face of Naples’s suffering.

Disability as Monstrous Spectacle

To better understand Serao’s corporeal depiction of Naples, it is important to understand disability’s relationship to the female and the grotesque as monstrous, the history of disability as monstrous in Italy and its role in the treatment of epidemics, and the distinction that must be made between disability and the grotesque in Serao’s work.

Serao describes Naples and its inhabitants as monstrous—of which, as previously explained, the poor female class is one example—often combining disability, femaleness, and the grotesque. Garland-Thomson, drawing from Freud’s and Aristotle’s understanding of women that define them by their improper form as mutilated men and monstrosities, reminds us that «Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as
defective departures from a valued standard» (GARLAND-THOMSON 2001, 7; 2002, 6). Monster (mostro), as Summers explains through his study of the grotesque, is related in its Latin roots to the verb mostrare, to show or indicate. He argues that it is therefore important to remember that monster is a visual metaphor: an extraordinary sight (SUMMERS 2003, 29). In a historical explanation of disability, Schianchi writes, «In latino, mostro (monstrum) deriva sia da ammonire (monere) sia da mostrare (monstrare), due verbi che rimandano all’avvertimento che proviene dalla divinità attraverso un segno che indica, mostra, annuncia, presagisce e predice» (SCHIANCHI 2012, 69-70). Within the contexts of gender, disability, and the grotesque, monsters are something out of the ordinary that attract the viewer’s gaze. Within the context of disability, however, Schianchi explains an additional layer of a divine warning that superimposes a dangerous connotation onto the term monster.

This narrative, in which disability is dangerously monstrous, deprives people with disabilities of an equitable place in society. It is not until the 1800s in Italy that bodily variations begin to be viewed as dimensions of the human and not monsters (CROCE et al. 2017, 75). Bodies deemed monstrous were cause for public scandal. Parlopiano’s medieval canon law model of disability offers insight to understand the relationship between deviant bodies and public scandal. Parlopiano explains that disability lies in the visibility of impairments and canonists’ fear of public scandal (PARLOPIANO 2015, 6). Though scandal then meant a «discredit to religion», it was still a measure by which to define maladies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as it evolved to mean «injurious to reputation» and continued to threaten institutions of power (OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY). In addressing epidemics in Naples,

the city council resolved on several occasions that all discussion of them be conducted in secret in order not to spread alarm. In 1876 Mayor Gennaro Di San Donato applied this policy of censure, interrupting a discussion of epidemic disease and rebuking the speaker for his “regrettable analysis” that would only cause rumors to spread. (SNOWDEN 1995, 14-15)

It is possible that the Neapolitan government adopted such censorship policies on epidemics due to the public reaction to early outbreaks that led Naples to be shunned (SNOWDEN 1995, 14). The censorship policy was pushed to extremes
during the 1910-1911 cholera outbreak; Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti enforced an unprecedented national policy of total secrecy under which public health authorities lied about the sanitary conditions of Italy, the press was censured, medical professionals were silenced, and Italy violated the Paris Sanitary Convention (SOWDEN 1995, 2). This fear of public scandal also drove Giolitti Law no. 36 (1904), which empowered the State to consign people to institutions based on «social dangerousness» and «public scandal», instead of medical diagnoses (CROCE et al. 2017, 83).

Disability, then, takes on a performative quality, in which its negative review by an audience comes to be one of its defining factors. In Il ventre di Napoli, Serao highlights the show-like quality of Naples by employing the word «spettacolo». She describes the performances as ugly, nauseating, and disgusting (SERAO 1906, 94). Their players are dilapidated houses and their inhabitants (ibid., 95). For Serao, the show is a bitter disenchantment of the unknown suffering of those behind the curtain of the Rettifilo (ibid., 111). Serao does not react to the spectacle with violence towards the actors, which, as she explains, is how people respond to those who are weak (SERAO 1881, 165-66). Serao experiences horror, both physically and morally. She feels shame and sadness, causing her to hesitate (SERAO 1906, 9). She is overcome by the desire to flee and no longer experience what takes place behind the Rettifilo (ibid., 109-11).

These affective and bodily reactions are a product of Serao’s «stare», which allows her to interact with Naples and Naples’s many marginalized bodies. Garland-Thomson persuasively argues that to «stare» is different from to «gaze». To «gaze» is «an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim» (GARLAND-THOMSON 2009, 9). To «stare», however, while often considered rude and judgmental, «creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response» (GARLAND-THOMSON 2009, 3). One example of staring in Il ventre di Napoli occurs when Serao ventures down amongst trash into the streets of Tentella, a small section of the belly near the Rettifilo. Serao hesitates to continue. In the shadows she sees a woman selling food who responds to her stare encouraging her. Serao narrates,
E m’incoraggia ad andare verso il fondaco Tentella, l’ostessa, con la bonomia napoletana, m’incoraggia, poiché vede che io esito, innanzi a tutte quelle sporcitie, lungo quelle mura trasudanti umidità, con quegli odori nauseanti: mi incoraggia, mentre io esito, fissando gli occhi in quella oscurità [...] mentre sul suo viso giallastro, sulle sue labbra violette, nei suoi denti neri, io leggo tutte le tracce di quella vita sprofondata nel lezzo e nei contatti costantemente malsani, tre o quattro persone, in una stanza, e che stanza, e le ore del giorno, in una cucina affumicata, a preparare le vivande male olenti, da vendere! (SERAO 1906, 109)

The «staring» that occurs between Serao and the woman in Tentella leads to meaning-making. Serao, through the encouragement of this woman’s «stare», continues to venture into Naples’s belly, where figures of power such as Nicola Amore, Agostino Depretis, and Umberto I had not dared to go. By «staring» at this woman and being stared at in return, Serao overcomes her fear and takes action: she gains further insight into the unjust conditions that affect her and continues to question the lack of appropriate governmental intervention in Naples, a problem further addressed in the next section of this essay. For example, Serao wonders when the last time a government official came to, or street cleaning occurred in Tentella (SERAO 1906, 109).

The Problematic Curing of Naples

Serao’s stare fixed on Naples’s belly fills her with negative emotions, but it also fuels her enquiry into unearthing the truth of Naples’s condition and the power dynamics contributing to it. Corporeal knowledge is a necessary condition of care (HAMINGTON 2004, 44), and Serao’s «stare» contrasts with the government’s shallow and judgmental gaze that lacks epistemological roots of corporeal knowing. Thus, Serao argues that gutting the belly is insufficient and that Naples must be re-created. The Italian government created Legislation 2892, «Per il risanamento della città di Napoli» to finance its «disembowelment» and redevelopment. The projects supported by this law, as Serao argues, did not improve the conditions of Naples, but worsened them.
Serao suggests that both the national and local governments were ineffective in their treatment of Naples. Law 2892 gave one hundred million liras to the Neapolitan municipality for the sanitization of Naples. This law supported a hygienic restoration of Naples by building new housing, closing or sanitizing existing housing, shutting down contaminated water sources, constructing plumbing channels, and providing drinkable water (Art. 14–6). It did not, however, provide instructions for these improvements. This legislation created a relationship between the national and local governments in which the national government provided financial support, but the municipality directed the sanitization projects (Art. 1). This relationship can be interpreted in two ways: the first gives power to the local government and does not call for major national intervention, allowing Naples to direct herself; the second criticizes the national government for lack of knowledge and involvement. Serao acts as a proponent of the latter.

This law was not the first attempt to provide sanitary housing. In 1884, Serao explains that years before hygienic housing for workers had been built. The rent, though, was more than double what a worker could feasibly pay (SERAO 1906, 14). The repeated mistake of building new housing with high rent demonstrates the ignorance of government officials, and their disregard for the financial situation of the poor working class. Between 1885 and 1904, more residential neighborhoods were built for the populace, which, once again, they were not able to inhabit due to the high cost of rent. While costly, these dwellings were still not hygienic. They lacked air and light due to overcrowding and were collapsing due to rushed work and poor calculations (ibid., 116-17, 122).

Like the new housing, improved water quality and plumbing systems also did not reach the people for whom the law was hypothetically created. According to Serao, the new water pipes benefitted «il volto e [...] il ventricolo dei ricchi, forestieri o non forestieri, dei borghesi, piccoli o grandi», but not the poor inhabitants of Naples’s belly, who continued to drink and wash with unsanitary waters (ibid., 132). In acknowledging the «face» and «ventricle» of the privileged, Serao connects Naples’s superficiality and finances. The face connotes surface level appearance in determining identity recognition, and the
heart is responsible for the flow of blood, which, again, according to Serao, is money.

Both the 1884 and 1904 sections of the 1906 edition of *Il ventre di Napoli* begin as reactions to reform ideas that cut into Naples’s belly: the 1884 articles start with Naples’s disembowelment; and the 1904 addition initiates with the creation of Corso Umberto I, which was approved on October 19, 1886 as part of Naples’s redevelopment. More commonly known as «il Rettifilo», the road travelled from the train station and cut Naples’s belly in half (ibid., 91). Neither of these incisions, the disembowelment nor the Rettifilo, cured Naples as their organizers proposed they would.

Disemboweling Naples targeted the intestines, where choleraic bacteria presumably lived. Such a surgery did not account for the systemic connection through which cholera moved. Cholera is mostly spread by contaminated water. In Naples, the water supply came from three major sources: the Bolla and Carmignano aqueducts, and the wells beneath the city. As Snowden explains, «The water provided by the Bolla and Carmignano aqueducts was lethally corrupted even before it reached the city» (Snowden 1995, 27). Hence, while reducing cholera in the body, disemboweling Naples could not eradicate cholera, which did not only come from within the belly. Instead, gutting Naples would further put her at risk, as she would not have a large intestine to provide nutrients to an already malnourished body nor the medical resources to live without intestines.¹²

Just as the surgery would exacerbate the problem, condemning Naples to death, the emptying of the belly’s neighborhoods of unsanitary buildings and their inhabitants worsened living conditions.¹³ The new construction not only failed to serve the people it aimed to house, but endangered pre-existing dwellings and caused homelessness. The inhabitants of the Lower Neighborhoods sank deeper into their interiors amongst ruins or relocated to the caves of Mount Echia. Both options proved dangerous, as the ruins and caves were unstable, killing inhabitants as pieces fell, and neither option offered improved sanitation (Serao 1906, 118–19).

The second solution that cuts into the belly, the Rettifilo, is additionally referred to by Serao as a screen, curtain, and canvas of illusion, as it tries to hide the belly from the «civilized» society that traverses it. The Rettifilo is an illusion
that tricks travellers who rush and have a superficial gaze. It does not fulfill its purpose as «l’appartatore dell’aria, della salute, della pulizia a migliaia e migliaia di popolani napoletani» (ibid., 91). A closer look reveals a ripped screen through which one sees «l’oscurità, il luridume delle quinte, ove tutto è rancido, è puzzolente, è nauseante» (ibid., 96-97).

Such illusions could be seen in much of the new construction. Most telling, perhaps, is the remodeling of the area known as Santa Lucia into the Rione della Bellezza with a garden, fountain, and portico. Serao explains the designer’s rationale as «per rammentare nella vita moderna, l’origine di Parthenope» (ibid., 152). She describes the zone as ugly, calling the term «beauty” a ridiculous and audacious exaggeration (ibid., 153-54). When she refers to the design as ugly, Serao draws attention to the contrast in Santa Lucia between the architecture reminiscent of Ancient Greece and that of the six-story American style buildings. The true ugliness, however, lies in the misdirection of the renovations. This is painfully felt when the reader recalls Serao’s earlier reference to Naples’s porticos. Here, the writer explains that the inhabitants of impoverished neighborhoods also felt nostalgia for the city’s Ancient Greek origins, but the mimetic architectural reminders do not serve them (ibid., 40); instead, these porticos contrast with the quotidian squalor that surrounds them.

Remnants of Ancient Greek culture live on in the architecture of the city as well as in its literary representations. Writers represent Naples’s body as picturesque and alluring to the foreign voyeuristic gaze. One example is the historic romanticizing of Mercato based on a brief crossing that leads to the marina (ibid., 8). Serao reprimands the Italian government for letting these images be their guides to Naples. The literary musings that embellish Naples as the land of Parthenope are not written for the government, but as entertainment for the public that does not want to experience misery (ibid., 3-4). Similarly, in her note to the reader that prefaces Leggende napoletane, Serao rationalizes the publication; she explains it as a necessary escape from the anguish of writing about reality, a prioritization of literature at the time. Despite Serao’s warnings, the governmental plans to recover Naples appear as misguided attempts to mimic the original mythic creation of Naples.
Curing Naples: A Return to the Original Body

The first two legends of Serao’s Leggende napoletane retell the stories of Naples’s origins and the city’s first two creators: Parthenope and Virgil. Serao refers to these beginnings as Naples’s «poetica origine», and uses poetic license in telling them (SERAO 1881, 31). The first creation story is that of Parthenope. Her Naples is characterized by love, where all life blooms and thrives (ibid., 18). This idealized Naples is eternalized and protected by the city’s second creator, the sorcerer and poet, Virgil, whose verse is nourished by Parthenope, and who, through a series of miracles, protects Naples. Despite the presence of love and the desire to protect the city, these popular tales perpetuate narratives of violence rooted within Naples’s origin.

«Parthenope» tells of the foundational relationship between city and body. This relationship is emblematized by the siren, Parthenope, in her Homeric form of part-woman, part-bird. Both the Greek and Roman versions connect Parthenope’s grotesque body to the early settlements of the present-day Neapolitan metropolis, while accounting for her death (as siren) through violence and male-centric power. In the Greek version, Parthenope, failing to entice Odysseus, kills herself. Her corpse, arriving on shore, inspires the settlers to name their land Parthenope. In the Roman version, Parthenope is instead transformed from siren into land as revenge for Zeus’s unrequited love (LEDEN 2011, 37). Serao revises the story of Parthenope and the creation of Naples in three critical ways. Firstly, Parthenope creates the city. Serao explains,

Tutto questo ha fatto Parthenope. Lei volle la città. Non più fanciulla, ma ora donna completa e perfetta madre: dal suo forte seno dodici figliuoli hanno vista la luce, dal suo forte cuore è venuto il consiglio, la guida, il soffio animatore. È lei la donna per eccellenza, la madre del popolo, la regina umana e clemente, da lei si appella la città, da lei la legge, da lei il costume, da lei il costante esempio della fede e della pietà. (SERAO 1881, 22-3)

Serao creates a relationship between Parthenope and the city, which is an extension of Parthenope’s body as woman. By describing Parthenope as a mother, Serao plays with the biological ability of woman to (re)produce. Creation here occurs both as a motherly generation of offspring and as the
building of the city, its laws, and traditions. While this could easily be summed up as a reduction of the female body to its reproductive organs, Parthenope while a mother, by the end of Serao’s legend is still a virgin like Mary in Christianity. Secondly, Parthenope does not die. Lastly, Parthenope does not have the grotesque form of a winged siren. Serao compares Parthenope’s peplum in the wind to wings of a bird (ibid., 1881, 14-15). Further confirming through absentia that Serao’s Parthenope is not a Homeric siren, Serao tells readers that the Greek meaning of Parthenope’s name is virgin. Serao ignores the ending of the name, derived from «ops», meaning voice. This distances Parthenope from the distinguishing quality of the Homeric siren—her song. These revisions offer an alternative narrative through the faith and piety-driven female power of creation and allow us to question the role of the grotesque body.

Erasing the grotesque allows Serao to alter the narrative of Naples both in terms of its creation, which is passed down through the literary canon in the Homeric tradition, and in the late-nineteenth century, when she is writing. Although Serao plays with mythological narratives in the same way as the authors of the classical epics, by physically altering Parthenope she distinguishes her legend from the existing literary tradition. This fits with Serao’s rationale for writing the legends as a break from old poetic forms and from the modern literary movement of verismo. To this end, Serao’s decision to omit the grotesque seems counterintuitive since the presence of grotesque figures has traditionally been interpreted as a way to alter narratives and to internalize and rearrange cultural expectations (Acciarino 2019, 49; Arnaudo 2014, 25). The classic narrative that Serao alters here, however, already portrays Parthenope as grotesque in her hybrid form as siren.

By removing the grotesque body, Serao inscribes what appears to be a strange return to—but is really a revision of—classicism within the power discourses of the time contributing to the literary portrayals of the South. In the introductory portion of «Parthenope», Serao comparatively describes the North and the South. In the North exist «le [sic] elfi a danzare la ridda magica», «le peccatrici walkirie, innamorate degli uomini», «le roussalke bellissime», «le maledette lavandaie, perfide allettatrici del viandante», «il folletto kelpis
[che] salta in groppa al cavaliere smarrito» (SERAO 1881, 11-12). These mystical creatures of Northern Europe do not appear in the South, which, in the discourse of the Southern Question, comes to define Italy, as Italy, by contrast comes to define Northern Europe. Like the siren, these northern mythical beings have a connection to the female form. By erasing Parthenope’s mythical grotesque form, Serao rejects a northern view of Naples as backwards, barbaric, and mystical, and a male view of Naples as object to be gazed upon.

We should not, however, be so quick to celebrate this revision. The removal of the grotesque calls into question hegemonic systems that privilege the northern gaze, the grand tour experience of the South, and the classicist version of the myth that highlights male power and violence. From the perspective of a modern reader, though, the erasure of the grotesque body must be questioned. While Sirens were originally known as the goddesses of death (LEDEEN 2011, 37), for Serao, Parthenope is symbolic of life and love in Naples. In fact, in the 1895 edition of Leggende napoletane, Serao retitles the «Parthenope» legend «La città d’amore». This erasure of the grotesque body reinforces a problematic hegemonic discourse, in which Parthenope’s admirable corporeal form as the positive embodiment of life, love, and creation is pitted against the siren’s grotesque body, connected to death and harm. The grotesque, then, appears monstrous.

The violent behavior in the Homeric myth of Parthenope appears again in the tale of Virgil the sorcerer. In the popular Virgil legend, which Serao reports, the sorcerer constantly saves and betters Naples by killing monsters. For example, Virgil creates a golden fly to kill the flies that are molesting Parthenope, he kills the leeches that are infecting the people and the serpent that is terrorizing the city, and he cures the horses from disease (Serao 1881, 33-36). The monsters are beasts, both otherworldly and common to the realm of humans, but the monsters are also illnesses and toxicity.

Serao insists that Virgil the sorcerer is Virgil the poet. Hence, Virgil the poet saves Naples from monsters, an essential part of Naples’s origins. Virgil is a literary authority on monsters and how to slay them. In his epic poem, Aeneid, the protagonist Aeneas is guided to the gates of the underworld by the Cumaean sibyl, where they encounter grotesque beasts, who are «all creatures of the poets and painters» (SUMMERS 2003, 28). Upon approaching these monsters,
Aeneas draws his sword, ready to slay them, but the sibyl stops him, reminding him of the futility of trying to kill shades (Virgil, VI 285-94). Thus, Virgil is not simply an authority on slaying monsters, but on knowing when to do so.\textsuperscript{15}

Returning to Parthenope’s picturesque Naples, the Government acts much like Virgil and Aeneas, trying to slay the city by slashing open her belly. Serao, however, much like the Cumaean sibyl, educates the government on the laws of gutting bodies. While Naples is a material body and could be disemboweled, the governmental view of Naples is an impression from the threshold of the belly; much like Aeneas’s sword against the monsters who guard the passage to the underworld, gutting Naples and creating the Rettifilo are insufficient then. Cutting open the belly reveals Naples as not just a grotesque, a hybrid fantastical body, but a body with disabilities suffering from injustices and being treated as cause for public scandals. The violent cutting open of bodies may work for grotesques, but it is not an appropriate approach in the face of disability. The next and final section of this essay focuses on Serao’s suggestions for appropriate techniques to acknowledge and address Naples’s problems.

\textit{Serao’s Moral Approach to Naples}

Care and piety are the alternative means Serao suggests in helping Naples, as opposed to the government’s superficial and violent cures. Her understanding of care mimics Parthenope’s love in creating Naples. Serao explains that Parthenope exemplifies piety (Serao 1881, 22-23). This differs from the governmental return to a Parthenopean Naples by following Parthenope’s process of creation, instead of jumping to a false production of the beautified end results. Serao’s understanding of care is also a Christian one in which, Naples, as she herself explains, will be resurrected first morally and then physically (Serao 1906, 170). According to both Naples and Serao, this moral resurrection comes to fruition through honor and honesty, especially in the actions of politicians and business dealings (ibid., 140-41, 167-68). Serao envisions a reciprocity of care between the city and her people that resembles Naples’s original state, where love bound humans and nature (Serao 1881, 20).
Serao’s proposals for a communal system of care do not differ drastically from Law 2892, but are structured in correspondence to Naples’s desires, and addressed with knowledge and practicality. Naples explains her needs to live: «ognuno dei miei cittadini, sia pure il più oscuro, il più ignoto, deve aver lavoro, salute, protezione, educazione, e tutti i cittadini e, io, Napoli, debo prendere il mio posto bello, nobile, forte, nella vita operosa ed efficace moderna» (SERAO 1906, 166). Serao addresses Naples’s necessities. Instead of the new governmental housing projects that are too expensive and lack proper sanitation, Serao suggests affordable housing that does not need to be an entire home, but simply a modest room; regulations on the number of people per room; and the restoration of monasteries to be rented out as rooms (ibid., 129-31). On the question of sanitation, she recommends the installation of water pipes and street cleaning (ibid., 132). To reduce crime, she proposes streetlamps and police presence (ibid., 131, 133). To further care for the soul, she calls for schools (ibid., 183). Altering bodies in Naples, then, should not happen through superficial curing, but by allowing rights to bodies of all abilities.

While many of Serao’s propositions are top-down approaches from the government to the people, the concept of care she demonstrates is rooted in Neapolitan society, especially within the belly where Catholicism holds greater influence than the post-unification government (SNOWDEN 1995, 50-51). Such care is demonstrated by the poor feeding the poor, women visiting hospitals and jails, and families adopting children (SERAO 1906, 74, 80-81). The power to incite reform in Naples, then, must initiate from the people’s piety and love (ibid., 195). One such occurrence is the workers’ strike in Torre Annunziata: «Cinquemila, sono, e si sono votati, come un uomo solo, al benessere della loro collettività al loro migliore avvenire, e in questo voto sociale che hanno fatto, danno, come antichi eroi, il migliore del loro sangue e il migliore delle loro forze» (ibid., 175-76). Returning to Naples’s glorified past, Serao compares the workers to ancient heroes. In this case, however, there is no savior complex in which Virgil sweeps in ridding Naples of its monsters, but rather a hearty demonstration of Naples’s autonomy.

Care, then, in Serao’s Naples, is a tool for interrogating power relationships. Serao is concerned with discerning the truth, especially in relation to power

This discerning can take place by paying close attention to narratives of «monstrous» bodies that warn readers, specifically those of the grotesque and of disability; the grotesque often indicates a connection to the fantastical and disability to reality. This is not an easy task for the reader, however, who may fear bodies with disabilities that society classifies as «abnormal» or «defective» and react with oblivion or anger.

Serao believes that Naples must be re-made. Understanding Naples through a lens of disability reveals the injustices that call for such a reformative action. Naples is not foremost a body with disabilities because of cholera. She does not solely have disabilities because her digestive and circulatory systems function poorly. Disability in Naples is not only a metaphor for injustices. It is a material condition of its inhabitants and a social condition triggered by those who are in too much of a hurry to witness the state of Naples’s body. Disability in Naples, then, must additionally be understood as a moral condition, rooted in Christianity, which is also political. According to Serao, «il difetto di cui tutti siamo malati, è la fretta» (ibid., 92). «Tutti», here, refers to we readers who could act as allies for the inhabitants of Naples’s belly, but are in too much of a hurry, or are too afraid to fix our eyes in Naples’s darkness. At the time Serao is writing, this includes the educated inhabitants of Naples’s Upper Neighborhoods, other journalists, travelers, the local and national government.

Yet not everyone is afraid to stare at and be stared at by the city. The means of care Serao proposes are exemplified through two Neapolitans to whom Serao dedicates the final two sections of Il ventre di Napoli: Ettore Ciccotti and Teresa Raveschieri. Ciccotti was a representative of Vicaria who, unlike other politicians, was not afraid to look. Hence, the people honored him with the title «father» (ibid., 194). According to Serao, Raveschieri, Neapolitan philanthropist and writer, was the embodiment of mutual understanding, of charity, faith, and hope (ibid., 204). What Ciccotti and Raveschieri had in common was their willingness to see the inhabitants of the belly. Their attention created a reciprocal relationship of care, demonstrated by the women of Vicaria who cry and scream to mourn the loss of Ciccotti, and by those who participated in the funeral proceedings of Raveschieri. Ciccotti’s and Raveschieri’s «staring»
led them to a piety that was not only theoretical, but that was efficient and operational (ibid., 195).

Despite seemingly good intentions, it would be unethical to end this article without addressing Serao’s treatment of bodies as literary tools. In Leggende napoletane, Serao temporarily «normalizes» Parthenope’s body, and in Il ventre di Napoli she utilizes disability as a metaphor. In both cases, traditional narratives of Naples’s bodies are engaged with, and challenged. It must, however, be acknowledged that the use of disability as metaphor is never acceptable, as it often equates disability with that which is wrong and unjust; this is the case in Il ventre di Napoli, where despite a shift from violent cure to acknowledging care, Serao seeks to eradicate Naples of its disabilities as they represent injustices. It is crucial, though, to remember that within the context of these texts and within late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Naples, the body is a relationship between the physical and the spiritual, and thus the relationship between disability and injustice is not solely metaphorical. The presence of disability in Naples has roots that penetrate deeper than the corporeal metaphor, and which need to be understood for a holistic approach to Naples as a metropolis that is a «mondo svariato, multiforme, [e] multanime» (ibid., 98).
Notes

1 «Bisogna sventrare Napoli», the title of Serao’s first chapter in *Il ventre di Napoli* (1906), is the slogan that comes to represent the sanitization of Naples and is first said by Prime Minister Agostino Depretis on the occasion of his visit to the city in September 1884. While many scholars (for examples see SNYDER 2012 and TENCH 1989) attribute this phrase to Depretis, Snowden recognizes that it could also be attributed to King Umberto I who was with the Prime Minister on this very visit (SNOWDEN 2002, 165). However, in *Il ventre di Napoli*, Serao associates it with Prime Minister Depretis, as following the chapter title «Bisogna sventrare Napoli» she begins the first paragraph, «Efficace la frase. Voi non lo conoscevate, Onorevole Depretis, il ventre di Napoli» (SERAO 1906, 3).

2 For how Serao compares to Zola, see JEULAND-MEYNAUD 1986, TENCH 1989, and HAZZARD and OLUBAS 2016.

3 BANTI 1965 suggests that in *Il ventre di Napoli* Serao defends women workers better than a social worker (98).

4 «Ventre» also means womb. For an analysis of the maternal metaphor in *Il ventre di Napoli*, see TENCH 1989.

5 For an example of Serao’s ambivalence see Serao’s 1895 article, “L’emancipazione della donna. ‘Il segnale della donna.’” For critical explanations of this ambivalence see BANTI 1965, FANNING 1993, and FANNING 2002.

6 The diffusion of choleraic bacteria reminds us that Naples is porous. Recent scholarship has studied the city’s porosity since BENJAMIN & LACIS 1925. See also: CHAMBERS 2008, IOVINO 2016, and GLYNN 2020.

7 For the juxtaposition between two things as creating disability see GARLAND-THOMSON’s 2011 definition of «misfit».

8 SNOWDEN 1995 suggests that the time between the 1884 and 1910-1911 outbreaks be understood as one indivisible period in Naples’s epidemic history (3).

9 SERAO 1906 is conscious of this difference in class (148); see: FANNING 1993.

10 For example, see Dante’s *Divina commedia*, specifically *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* for the relationship between sin, redemption, and corporeal form or Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, where «cristiani» and «uomini» are used as interchangeable terms spoken in the voices of the local Lucani, who refer to themselves not as «cristiani» but «bestie» (LEVI 1945, 3).

11 Likewise, CHAMBERS 2008 and GLYNN 2020 recognize the importance of approaching Naples with embodied knowledge.

12 For information on Neapolitan hospitals and doctors at the time, see SNOWDEN 1995.

13 Given that «ventre» also means «womb», emptying it as a precursory step to renovating the city carries even more irony since, biologically Naples would need her womb to produce a new city.

14 Virgil explains that Parthenope nourished his verse in *Georgics* IV, which Serao quotes in «Virgil».

15 For Virgil’s authority on slaying monsters, see also Dante’s *Purgatorio XIX*. 
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