

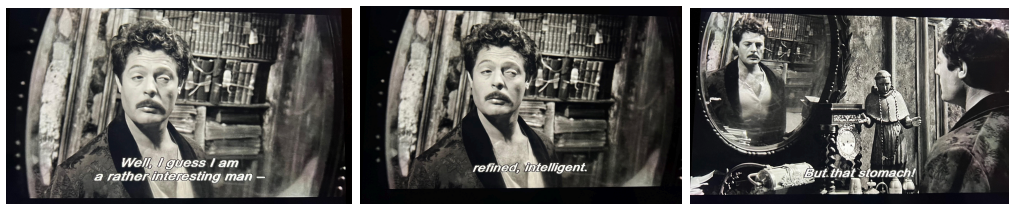
# *Satirical Femicide and Divorce Italian Style*

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By the early 20th century, Italian laws crafted loopholes that reduced sentences for the honor killing of wives who committed adultery against their husbands to reinforce patriarchal ownership over female sexuality. Simultaneously, the economic miracle of post-fascist Italy amplified anxiety about technological modernization and its influence on housewives and young women's desire to be more independent. Italian women earned the right to vote because of their contributions to the defeat of fascism. Yet, patriarchal authority persisted within legal, religious, and social institutions that invigorated efforts to maintain misogyny. *Commedia all'italiana* emerged during this period of rapid industrialization and gender conflicts, shifting the focus from the desperate, tragic tones of neorealism to a more “bittersweet” satire that examines the contradictions of Italian life through dark comedy. *Divorce Italian Style* by Pietro Germi, a hallmark of this genre, transforms femicide into a comedic performance of ultimate masculinity, in which patriarchal authority is epitomized through the ownership of women’s lives, sexuality, and emotional devotion, expressed through the calculated grooming of young Angela as both romantic fantasy and justification for murder.

Baron Ferdinando Cefalù, the male lead of *Divorce Italian Style*, is the embodiment of the fragile l’italiano medio typically depicted in *Commedia all'italiana*. He is a character whose masculinity is a performance that masks the threat of a weakened patriarchal order. This archetype mirrors the contradiction of Italian society’s flaws and taboos, which illuminate masculinity as overstated and vulnerable. Peter Bondanella writes that Mastroianni's role as Ferdinando publicly presents himself as a “Latin lover”, but is the true embodiment of an impotent loser reckoning with the burden of a society bound by ancient views of masculinity.

(Bondanella, 2005) In society and interactions with Angela, he presents as an alluring seducer, but his personal life exposes his fragile sense of self. Here, masculinity within the film is defined as a staged identity, a manufactured facade that disguises anxieties around aging, sexual inadequacy, and the prospects of losing patriarchal control. Ferdinando's efforts to reclaim authority, his internal narration, and his self-monitoring showcase how masculinity is reliant on flagrant displays of supremacy. This inability to maintain performance is evident in the mirror sequence, where Fefe examines and delivers self-compliments before he becomes uncomfortable with his aging body. (14:02-15:10)



His self-affirmation process is theatrical and can't be maintained because of the reality of his own declining virility, especially in the scene before, where he catches his much younger sister and her lover in the act. Forcing him to be aware of his sexlessness. (13:23-14:14)



His interactions with his wife deepen the resentment of his self-hatred that he projects outward; she is the embodiment of his perceived impotence, encouraging things about his appearance that he hates, whilst affirming the reality of his constriction. A scene in which Rosalia argues that soap-making will be an effective way of saving money. Fefe, annoyed, encourages bad spending, and she doesn't back down. (16:00-16:30) The inability to acquire and maintain wealth, especially amid the economic miracle of post-fascist Italy, is another crack in Fefe's performance

of masculinity. Rosalia doesn't fall in line or stroke his ego; she is outspoken and solution-driven, which deepens his resentment of their marriage. This sequence toggles between a cognitive dissonance of reality and performance, and we see this struggle within Ferdinando that results in him finding solace in murder fantasies about her to reclaim his masculinity. These fantasies are rehearsals of dominance, where Ferdinando gets to kill Rosalia in dramatic ways that reclaim his power. In Fefe's first fantasy, he stabs Rosalia and mixes her into the soap-making bucket. An act that directly reflects his anger for her challenging him and reduces her to a material resource to be consumed and discarded. (17:09-17:47)



The humor in the fantasy's absurdity exposes the performance of entitlement. Fefe searches for power to deplete and silence Rosalia to preserve his ego, whilst affirming his right to take violent action against women. The perspective of the majority of these fantasies distances itself from Fefe. As Rosalia dies from quicksand or is shot in the street, combined with the first fantasy, it foreshadows Rosalia's inevitable demise as a construction of both behind-the-scenes plots and face-to-face killing. Both the mirror sequence and the murder fantasies elucidate how societal expectations are bolstered through an internal performance, in which men have to validate their experiences and insecurities, to maintain power internally and facilitate it collectively. As Ferdinando nurtures his resentment, he slowly but surely becomes violent, which is the most accepted and understood masculine performance. Once he takes that step, his validity as a man is restored, and he finds peace at the cost of a dead woman.

As masculinity in *Divorce Italian Style* is an established performance of dominance and violence, it garners validity through the ownership of women's bodies, sexuality, and emotional devotion. Positioning the women within the film as extensions of male authority rather than autonomous people. This is seen through the voyeuristic sequence where both Ferdinando and his father "take turns" spying on Angela from the bathroom window. (8:45-10:04)



They claim ownership over her body by transforming her into a visual object; the power lies with the voyeur as they project their sexual fantasies upon her until Ferdinando becomes entitled to groom and later seduce her. Ferdinando's father's involvement also intensifies this entitlement as a cultural system that grants men the opportunity to objectify and prey on women, whether in person or as a voyeur. Behaviors like this are passed down from generation to generation, with men subtly encouraging certain proclivities that emphasize the need for discretion when acting on these behaviors. Both of these scenes, happening back-to-back, are representative of stalker comedy or the stalking-for-love trope that portrays these behaviors as charming, amplifies the attractiveness of the love interest, and weakens the resolve of all men who find her attractive. However, in contrast to Angela's age and both of their relationship to her being a cousin and an uncle, it trivializes the predator/prey dynamic that it invokes, placing the weight of said objectification on her rather than on the two middle-aged men stalking her. This progresses into Ferdinando's meticulous grooming of Angela, in which he slowly reconfigures her emotions and expectations to align with his ambitions. Grooming functions through consistent emotional manipulation that disguises control as romantic. Fefe constantly keeps his gaze transfixed on

hers. When they are at church, he is watching, or when she is just perusing the streets with her



mother, he makes sure that she is aware of him. (6:30-6:45 & 11:37-11:47)



Angela is only 16, carefully monitored by her family and constantly in a girls' catholic school. Luca Barattoni states the catholic essence of Italian femininity was integral to 1950s cinema, as it aimed to tame independent women into domesticity. (Barattoni, 2012) This rhetoric combatted the rise of feminist media and also helped shape the political attitudes of women within the church. Purity culture and saving oneself for marriage are pillars of this institution, and as a schoolgirl, Angela's experience with men or boys her age is nonexistent. She is a growing teenager who is craving love, especially when her own father sexualizes and shames her. Fefe understands her innocence and isolation and offers her this tenderness that, for someone her age, is irresistible. Through these interactions, the conquest of Angela becomes a performance of masculine power, in which Ferdinando is the seducer, Angela is easy prey who will fall for his game, and their dynamic stands in contrast to Rosalia, who frequently attempts to entice Fefe, which he deems as unattractive. When they meet at the beach, he lures her in with the loneliness of not having anyone to share flowers with, and buries his face within the bouquet against her chest to simulate intimate contact. (20:36-21:17)



Here, Ferdinando escalates, using the time alone and her softness to his advantage. As stated before, Angela is isolated, and as her father's shouts echo, his possessiveness dictates her whereabouts and feelings. A void exists between who Angela has to be with her father and what she feels for Ferdinando; thus, two manufactured experiences are owned by the only two men in her life. When Angela and Fefe sleep together for the first time, she is under duress after being beaten by her father for having romantic feelings. Instead of offering comfort, he uses it as an excuse to be intimate with her, accelerating their emotional attraction, whilst also taking advantage of her vulnerability. (30:10-30:57) It's questioned towards the end of the film if Angela truly loves Fefe, because when they are finally together, she is flirting with the boat attendant. Based on the progression of their relationship, it's implied that she doesn't love him, as he has trained her to associate seduction with love. (1:43:50 - 1:44:41)



As Ferdinando's infatuation with Angela intensified, he became convinced Rosalia was nothing but an obstacle to his personal freedom and sexual fulfillment. Fefe could no longer self-serve his masculine authority with his murder fantasies and plots to exploit the honor killing laws to ultimately get rid of his wife. As Claudie Pecorella and Noemi Cardinale explain, honor killings have always been a systematic pillar of Italian culture that can be traced back to Roman times, which affirms femicide as a reaction to dishonour. (Pecorella & Cardinale, 2025) The Rocco code of 1930, which is still in effect, institutionalized that in the case of homicide and bodily

harm, the action had to be a reaction to dishonor caused by anger induced by the offence.

(Pecorella & Cardinale, 2025) Legal protections of honor killings not only excuse violence but also set the precedent that women's lives are always perceptible to sacrifice as protection for a man's honor, upholding femicide as a necessary evil to sustain patriarchal ownership. The film features multiple court cases involving both male and female attackers to create the illusion that honor killings are gender neutral, when historically these crimes are largely committed by men. The use of the exaggerated defense monologue, in contrast to the cheering crowd, strategically mutates lethal violence into a bureaucratic performance of ownership disguised as tradition and protection. As Fefe plots, he first denies affection and romance from Rosalia to make her needy, lonely, and desperate. (41:08- 41:29) As her husband, patriarchal authority gives him ownership of her ability to have sex, receive warmth, and connection. He uses that to his advantage and lures her into the opportunity of an affair, just as he planned. Another example of this in the film is when Fefe takes ownership of Rosalia's sexuality and coaches her to dress more seductively so that she is an object to be conquered by any man who is willing. (37:30- 38:50) He essentially is serving her on a platter using his masculine authority as her husband, to implicate and kill her, whilst ensuring that his role as an honourable man remains intact. The dark comedic tone of each scene underscores the gravity of the violence displayed on the screen. The audience is meant to sympathize with Ferdinando in all his grotesque behaviors, cheapening Rosalia's identity scene by scene, so that by the end, you almost root for her death. These instances of ownership show the extent to which men in Italian society have unlimited power and access to the bodies, sexuality, and emotional devotion of the women and young girls they encounter. They link internal scripts with favorable social outcomes through indoctrination and preserve patriarchy.

In conclusion, *Divorce Italian Style* elucidates the instability of the patriarchal cultural systems by visualizing the performance of masculinity, and its physical anchor–ownership–, as a crumbling mechanism fighting to reinforce stability despite the violence it perpetrates. The presentation of femicide as a satirical dark comedy exposes the illusion of power that men possess but also the social systems that enable it via female subjugation.

#### Work cited page

All of the image attachments are photos on my phone that I took from my iPad screen

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