

More and more ‘on the side of the girls’. The process of feminisation in Italian publishing for children across textual and visual narratives

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Abstract

The paper aims to trace the major changes that occurred in Italian publishing for children and adolescents with regard to the representation of feminine identities. The study moves from the first cultural and literary revolutions of the 1960s to the gendered models offered by some contemporary works. Different narrative formats are considered to provide an analysis that takes into account the diversity of children’s books published in Italy, which move across different genres and target audiences: from the first editorial series that gave a new voice to the feminine, like ‘Il Martin Pescatore’ and ‘Gl’Istrici’, up to publishers or series that offered picturebooks following a precise gender-sensitive policy (Dalla parte delle bambine, Settenove, EDT, etc.); from the influence of the Japanese world through manga narratives, up to the latest comic books by Bao Publishing and Tunué. The contribution aims not only to highlight an ongoing social and literary change, but also to emphasize the pedagogical potential of anticonventional and egalitarian narratives on young readers.

Keywords: gender representation; Italian children’s literature; comics; picturebooks; inclusive narratives.

I. FEMALE LITERATURE REVOLTS IN THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

With its revolts, 1968 introduced a new identity awareness that influenced various areas, including education and literature. In Italian history, a fundamental contribution was made by Elena Gianini Belotti (1973), whose *Dalla parte delle bambine* unmasked those subtle but persistent stereotypes that conditioned the education of boys and girls in different contexts, from school to family, up to collective imaginary (Ulivieri, 1995; De Serio, 2012; Marone, 2012). *Dalla parte delle bambine*, which is still topical and a great source of inspiration for all those who approach Gender Studies, reserves

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more than one section precisely to the power of children's literature, which is often based on rigid social beliefs structured on gender canons. Strong, performing, active males discover the world, but are limited in their expression of feelings, fears, and fragilities, while passive, silent females are locked behind windows that turn the house into a prison from which they cannot escape. Gianini Belotti's analytical work is in line with post-1968 feminist and revolutionary ideals as it aims to unmask persistent prejudices and secular discrimination, proposing effective solutions starting from childhood, so as to educate new generations toward a more egalitarian future. The power of education is thus placed at the centre of the volume: education is explored as the driving force behind radical social transformations, involving various tools that include books and their formative function against gender bias (Antoniazzi, 2018; Dello Preite, 2019). Educational processes, starting with those involved in children's narratives, should critically situate the individual in an increasingly complex social context and provide him/her with tools, both real and imaginative, that support him/her in the clash between personal desires and social standards (Sarracino, 2011).

In the wake of a new awareness raised from 1968 movements (Corbi, 2018; Corbi & Sarracino, 2004), in the following decades various publishers began to develop a fresh cultural scenario. After the Second World War, female protagonists started finding greater space in children's literature, but books for girls or representing girls still preserved a strong pedagogical approach and contents that might be ground-breaking at the time, but lost its innovation features over the time (Barsotti, 2013: 83). Therefore, what was needed was a turning point, books that looked towards the future, towards substantial changes that go beyond mere female protagonism to outline multifaceted, countercultural portraits.

One of the earliest innovations, also preceding the publication of Gianini Belotti's work and Sixties revolts, can be attributed to the Florentine publishing house Vallecchi, which marked an initial breakthrough in children's publishing market. This was due to the editorial advice of Donatella Ziliotto who, in 1958, created and directed the series *Il Martin Pescatore*, followed by the subtitle *Classici di domani per la gioventù* (Tomorrow's Classics for Youth). The series proposes to Italian readers foreign authors capable of renovating children's culture from various points of view, for instance considering new identities (De Serio, 2015). Among the works published, we can mention above all *Pippi Calzelunghe* by Astrid Lindgren (1945/2017), as well as other authors who had never been translated into Italian before. Indeed, Donatella Ziliotto shows a multifaceted personality that had a significant influence on Italian popular culture (Beseghi, 1987: 68-69): she is a writer, translator, editorial director, film director, and programmer for RAI and her professional affirmation in various fields related to children's culture was a key step in modernising the works proposed to boys and girls across different media.

The fictitious heroines selected by Ziliotto broke with conventions and liberated childhood from the moralising and strictly pedagogical attitude

that had long been its hallmark. For instance, Ziliotto decided to open the series with *Pippi Calzelunghe* (1945), a bestselling novel by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, translated into more than sixty languages. Ziliotto recalls:

I published it as the opening book of the series *Il Martin Pescatore* [...] so that even Italian girls learned that they could become strong and independent and aspire, when grown up, to lift up in the air and throw away everything that used to bully them, just as Pippi does with thieves (Lepri, 2016: 333).

Bianca Pitzorno, the female novelist par excellence, “mother of only female daughters” (Beseghi, 1987: 70), also recalls Pippi’s crucial role in Italian and foreign publishing industry:

Today, for children’s book scholars *Pippi* represents a milestone and, indeed, a watershed. With Pippi, honeyed and edifying children’s literature, where the grown-ups are always right and the little ones only have to obey and learn to behave properly, ends forever. Before and after Pippi, this is the new date criterion for modern children’s literature. And for writers, Astrid Lindgren is a model which, whether they accept it or not, they cannot help but measure themselves against (Pitzorno, 2002).

Pippi juxtaposes a series of autonomous episodes with a horizontal macro-plot and narrates the adventures of Pippi, a nine-year-old girl living alone in Villa Villacolle, and of her friends Annika and Tommy. Pippi has no family ties: a first major break that allows her to live autonomously and experiment with new norms that do not have to follow outdated adult rules: her mother is an alleged – and rather silent – angel who looks after her right from the sky, while her father is a sailor who only occasionally returns to Villa Villacolle, but who never forces the little girl to follow him in his seafaring adventures if she is not willing to do it (Trisciuzzi, 2018: 108). However, the house is not a trap for Pippi as she can leave the hearth whenever she wants to undertake excursions into nature, adventures across the seas, and city wanderings. Pippi is lively, irreverent, free; she is a risk-lover, a vagabond, and a liar. She is somehow the opposite of Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll: Alice is a logical and well-behaved child in an absurd world, as much as Pippi is unexpected and absurd in a world that follows conventional logic (Ziliotto, 1987: 23).

Pippi constitutes an anti-pedagogical model that fascinates little girls and boys but created scandal among (some) adults. Young readers found in *Pippi* an emancipatory drive that would condition their lives, demonstrating the liberating power of Children’s Literature and the need for a new (auto)biographical narration, sensitive to gender identities (Sirignano & Maddalena, 2012: 89). As Ziliotto (1987: 23) highlights:

At the end of the Sixties, many of the girls who took part enthusiastically and with great vitality in the student movements had read *Pippi* at the

beginning of that decade; this is not a hypothesis, but a fact arising from surveys that are not only Italian: this is in fact the answer given also by female students of various American women's colleges regarding their preference in their first readings.

Therefore, there was a generational shift under the influence of new models that went beyond literary depictions to become real, effective. Some parents were influenced by Lindgren's vision of childhood and brought up their children with an unprecedented elasticity if compared to the strict education they had received, giving voice to unruly and restless children who had never been listened to before (Trisciuzzi, 2018: 110). Between the Fifties and Sixties, and thus in pioneering times, Ziliotto's innovative spirit unfolded a new feminine trend, a path that several women, both authors and readers, began to follow, heading towards egalitarian and/or unconventional models.

While some conservative publishing houses continued to promote ideals of femininity firmly anchored to tradition, to the canonical role of the wife and mother, and therefore lacking any identity nuances and any encouragement to rebellion (Antoniazzi, 2018), it was precisely from feminist ideals that a small publishing house was founded in Milan with a manifesto openly aimed at gender equality: *Dalla parte delle bambine*. The project, born in 1975 and carried on until 1985, wanted to propose picturebooks that unmask and deconstruct female stereotypes and was successfully taken as a source of inspiration by European countries such as France and Spain.

Among the picturebooks presented in the series, we can first mention *Rosaconfetto*, the story of an elephant girl who does not want to become pink like her companions, who are coloured by the anemones they constantly eat in order to be beautiful. The elephant girl is repeatedly told that if she does not become pink, she will never be beautiful and therefore will never marry. The little elephant, criticised mainly by her parents, leaves her paddock and starts exploring, rolling around in the mud, playing with water, as well as making friends with male elephants. Following her brave example, the other female elephants leave the paddock too and begin to run and play in freedom with her. From that moment on, according to the story, there are no more pink elephants, but they all look the same whether they are male or female. *Rosaconfetto* is one of the first books on the subject published in Italy: a picturebook that aims to undermine stereotypes related to female obedience, kindness, and beauty (Trisciuzzi, 2020: 58-59).

There follow picturebooks such as *La vera storia dei bonobo con gli occhiali*, where female awareness and the need for a sisterhood relationship to rebel against power – in this case, a group of male bonobos – is narrated. Or the picturebook *Una fortunata catastrofe*, where domestic duties and parental roles are questioned through the depiction of anthropomorphic characters, namely a family of mice, leading to new family

relationships that see the mother breaking out of the sphere of care and domesticity and the father entering it.

The editorial project is still innovative, although it shows some now-outdated strategies. For instance, most of the books operate by showing a particularly persistent stereotype – e.g. the figure of a lazy father, who sits comfortably in his armchair telling sensational tales to his children while the mother works in the kitchen – and then overturn it to show a possible solution aimed at women's emancipation. In this way, a gender-based prejudice is unmasked and empowerment is promoted, but a harmful stereotype is once again narrated, and its image continues to permeate our imagination, even though discredited. Moreover, these narratives, in their reversal of parental gendered roles, do not take into account the complexity of the affective-emotional dimension and the importance of the educational relationship in the individual's growth process (Marone, 2006). There is also a frequent artificial overturning of gender roles, set through an almost imposed or decontextualised entrance of the feminine into the masculine sphere. This choice follows the ideals of a 'feminism of equality' that in those years had already been overtaken in favour of greater contact with the valorisation of differences. As Ulivieri (1992: 51-52) points out, "It is not just a matter of liberating women within a universe that is still all-male, but to affirm their specificity, to consolidate it and make it live dialectically in society, in our culture".

It is also worth emphasising the absence (justified for the time) of a masculine awareness, right from the name of the series, deliberately addressed to girls. However, in doing so girls are somehow relegated to a niche, lacking a fruitful dialogue between genders that would lay the foundations for a real paradigm shift (Antoniazzi, 2018). The products are therefore strictly thematic and, for this reason, confined to an audience interested in the issue and thus already sensitised. Yet, in spite of some critical points that might emerge for a contemporary reader, the literary and pedagogical value of this innovative publishing project, capable of opening the way to new gender representations, is undeniable.

2. THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES: NEW FEMININITIES IN EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURES

The Eighties and Nineties represented a further turning point whereby female characters ventured into new, unimaginable narrative horizons (Barsotti, 2013: 83). This was primarily the result of a social change; as argued by Ulivieri (2009: 20), these years "saw girls grow up more serene, more convinced of the value of their female identity. [...] they are reliable girls, often able to stand on their own two feet and do not feel discriminated against because they are female".

A fundamental step in Italian children's publishing is a further achievement by Ziliotto, namely the editorship of the famous series *Gl'Istrici* for

Salani, for which she creates an appealing manifesto and a handy pocket format that will find an editorial success not yet in decline. This is how the series is described in the publisher's catalogue, using an effective metaphor:

There is a legend that porcupines shoot their quills, like arrows, at those who tickle them. Try to tickle our porcupines and they will sting you: they will hit your imagination and your heart, amusing, fascinating and frightening you. We have searched the whole world for them and now they are here to sting you, sting you.

Gl'Istrici offers attractive graphics, colourful covers, an easy-to-read format, as well as modern content, complex characters, and challenging issues. In addition, the series brings or affirms outstanding foreign authors in Italy, such as Michael Ende, Roald Dahl, Jacqueline Wilson, Anna Fine, Christine Nöstlinger, and many others. As a result, the literary canon proposed to Italian children broadens and expands its boundaries not merely to foreign authors, but to new issues hitherto silenced as they had been considered unsuitable for young children. Literature becomes reader-friendly, calibrated not to convey teachings handed down from on high, but to reflect the real needs, dreams, desires, and problems of young readers. The works are also characterised by a style that, whilst heterogeneous, is distinguished by careful use of humour, surrealism, fantasy and horror, grotesqueness and irony (Faeti, 1995; Blezza Picherle, 2007; Barsotti & Cantatore, 2019; Forni, 2021). Thus, different and compelling literary styles flourish, captivating a wide audience and tickling different readers' imaginations, thus entertaining rather than educating. Ziliotto states:

In this case too, I thought of a defence of children through reading. In my series there are no fairy tales and warnings, but books that must entertain and at the same time get readers used to becoming critical of a reality that attempts to suffocate them, including through the media. [...] Nothing is censored from the children of Gl'Istrici, no themes, precisely because I have great respect for my readers (Zilitotto, cit. Lepri, 2016: 334).

Even if the series does not deal explicitly with gender topics, the innovation indirectly invests this sphere as well, and perhaps its strength lies in the fact that it does not voluntarily deal with egalitarian issues, but 'simply' promotes high-quality literature with diverse, heterogeneous portraits for both male and female readers, without a precise targeting that would have turned it into a fringe project. In Gl'Istrici, we can recall Roald Dahl's little girls, like Matilde; Christine Nöstlinger's magical, bizarre and grotesque stories that place the feminine in an unproblematic, purely fantastic, irreverent reassessment (*Ma che nano ti salta in testa?*, *L'invenzione del signor Bat(man)*); Jacqueline Wilson's out-of-the-ordinary families and children (*Bambina affittasi*); Bibi's adventures by Danish author Karin Michaëlis, a predecessor of Pippi pu-

blished in Italy in the 1930s and then included among the female voices of the catalogue (Trisciuzzi, 2017).

A significant work, out of many, is *Dakota of the White Flats* by Philip Ridley (1989/2008). Here we find a little girl who is far removed from the female stereotype: violent, impetuous, courageous and determined, Dakota loves insects, swears and lives in a decaying environment that deviates from traditional places of care and domesticity reserved for little girls or women. In the novel, hyper-realistic and fantastic elements combine to give life to a fairy-tale story that has a lot to say about real feelings, situations and difficulties. Dakota is a little girl in constant search of adventure, a desire that will drive her to explore the world – “The last time you had an adventure you were gone for three days and three nights” her mother reminds her in concern (Ridley, 1989: 29). Dakota’s journey recalls the journey of a historically masculine hero, but in this case, it elects the feminine as its protagonist, providing a formative and emancipatory opportunity for young female readers as well (Barsotti, 2013: 88).

In the Italian context, we can mention several key series that were born between the 1980s and 1990s; series whose goal was to reassess the role of the readers, the quality of the texts proposed, as well as the representations of gender or family dynamics. For example, in 1981 the publishing house E. Elle launched the pocket book series *Le letture*, which collected some of the most important Italian authors. This was followed in 1988 by Mondadori’s Junior series, offering high-quality books for children, among which we can mention some novels by Bianca Pitzorno, whose works feature numerous innovative female portraits, such as Lavinia, Polissena, Barbara and Laurentina, Violante, Aglaia and Bianca, Mo, etc. (Barsotti, 2011). In the same year, the *Ex Libris* series, created by Orietta Fatucci for the publisher Edizioni EL, builds a new space for groundbreaking themes intended for an adolescent audience: school difficulties, love stories, broad issues such as war and exploitation, or everyday topics such as new families and gender roles.

Mondadori’s *Gaia* (1988), by contrast, is characterised by a precise focus on femininity. The series includes novels for teenage girls which are not traditional romantic fiction, but books on various themes ranging from adventure to mystery. The works are both Italian and translated from other languages: among the major names, we can mention Bianca Pitzorno, Astrid Lindgren, Christine Nöstlinger, Penelope Lively, and Margaret Mahy. These volumes skilfully blend reality and fantasy to give voice to real issues, without forgetting the power of fantasy: the girls portrayed in the series are multidimensional and take action in different literary genres, thus offering the reader a greater possibility of identification and empathic contact (Beseghi, 1994). These are curious girls, who want to understand the world, and above all girls experiencing a transformation process and facing the fragile moment of their entrance into adolescence or adulthood, narrated in enjoyable but meaningful stories, formative yet never didactic. *Gaia* represented a new project: it enhances differences, gives voice to fe-

mininity, and fills a publishing gap – books targeting pre-adolescent girls (Barsotti, 2013). Quoting Beseghi (1994: 88):

Gaia thus aims at an adolescent (or rather, pre-adolescent) audience, claiming a writing style that no longer obeys either the more or less latent morals of educational literature, or the patterns of romantic literature, but shuffles all the cards in the most creative way possible.

However, some publishing products have taken children's literature a few steps backward, such as Mondadori's *Le ragazzine* series, which, while attracting a very large audience thanks to appealing graphics and thus encouraging reading even among less keen readers, proposed fast stories made up of flat, stereotypical, repetitive characters, often built on female clichés that created an extremely sectorial product right from the name of the series and promoted images and events far removed from the deconstruction of stereotypes (Hamelin, 2011: 194-195).

Nonetheless, the 1980s and 1990s did not only lead to a change in textual literary spheres, such as the novel, but encouraged new female protagonism also in other narrative formats, which became popular amongst those readings which were personally selected by young people. For example, while on TV various Japanese animated products conquered a large audience, the manga market began to seduce young readers, showing a steady growth that is now reaching new heights in sales (Ibid.: 208).

Considering female representation, an interesting scenario is offered by *shōjo manga*, a category that varies greatly in style and narrative genre, and which is marked by a female target audience (from childhood to adolescence) that often refers to a definite aesthetic “dominated by images of flowers, ribbons, fluttering hem skirts, and innocent-looking girls with large, staring eyes” (Monden, 2015: 3). While in the Fifties *shōjo manga* were mainly created by male artists, thereby stereotypically appeasing a part of the public that was considered secondary – female readers – from the Seventies onwards this genre was enriched by the presence of female manga artists, who managed to bring a narrative turn to the sector. Thus, mid-20th century works were initially linked to sentimental and melodramatic themes, with characters featuring androgynous traits and an aesthetic strongly linked to stereotypical femininity, while from the Seventies the stagnant vision of femininity has been slowly deconstructed. In Italy, *shōjo manga*'s success was not immediate, but towards the end of the Nineties, these works started catching female readers' interest and established themselves among the many publishing possibilities reserved for a young audience (Hamelin, 2011: 209).

One of the best known *shōjo manga* was published in Italy in 1993, twenty years after its release in Japan, namely, *Le rose di Versailles* by Riyoko Ikeda. The work – published in 1984 by Fabbri in a magazine, but not in volumes before the Nineties – tells the story of Lady Oscar, already famous to the Italian public thanks to the animated TV series

that had arrived in Italy eleven years earlier. Here, gender experimentation reaches a new level: we are not dealing with a simple female protagonism or a contrived gender reversal but with a much more fluid and irreverent experience. Oscar is a girl raised by her father as a boy: a woman who wears male clothes, who performs actions reserved for men (she is, for example, the royal guard of Marie Antoinette), an unconventional heroine, especially considering the setting of the work, which is pre-revolution France, during the reign of Louis XVI, reconstructed with extraordinary precision and minuteness. Lady Oscar is a strong woman, captain of the guards of Versailles, a woman who can do anything, characterised by a fluidity of identity capable of unmasking the artificial construction of gender.

Oscar's appearance reflects an androgynous ideal, placing the girl in a space in between that lacks effective gender connotations. She is masculine in comparison to Marie Antoinette, but feminine in comparison to characters such as *Andrè* or *Hans*. The protagonist's design takes advantage of the symbolic and often undetailed visual construction of characters found in manga to play with gender shades, creating a character "free from bodily constraints" (Anan, 2014: 45). Oscar, who identifies with the female gender and carries on heterosexual relationships, manages to perform gender (Butler, 1990) as both male and female, changing fluidly according to the context and the peer group. The performativity of her gender affects her everyday life and also her love relationships, as: "Oscar displays masculine strength and agency and finds true love without sacrificing her beauty and identity for her male lover, *Andrè Grandier*" (Hirozane, 2022: 12).

The visual and textual contrast with Marie Antoinette further reveals the precariousness of gender roles and highlights the need to provide different female portraits: Marie is a gentle, fragile girl who becomes the mother of three children and symbolically of all France, while Oscar is a soldier, a girl who is willing to fight to destroy the ancient regime. However, Oscar is emancipated inasmuch as she enjoys a possibility denied to Marie, that is, the access to the male world, with all that follows:

Oscar's social awareness may seem possible because she is granted access to the male sphere, which is, according to her, broader and more meaningful, compared to the female sphere represented by cosmetics, beautiful dresses, and children (Anan, 2014: 43-44).

It can be noted, though, how the protagonist's more masculine traits introduce her into contexts of freedom, activity, and emancipation, while clothes, traits or behaviours that are culturally perceived as feminine bring her back to a state of passivity, silence, oppression, and thus to a very conventional femininity. The performativity of gender is thus closely linked to the dress worn by the girl, which becomes a metaphor for behaviours, actions, and possibilities (Monden, 2015: 3). After all, the theme of cross-dressing is very present in *shōjo* manga, starting with the first *shojo* work,

Tezuka's *Principessa Zaffiro* (1967)¹. The story tells of Princess Sapphire, born in the body of a girl with the soul of a boy. As the only heir to the throne, the protagonist is raised as a boy to inherit the kingdom, but her early adolescent love troubles open Sapphire's eyes to her identity.

Going back to *Le rose di Versailles*, Oscar is revolutionary not only in Italy but also in Japan (Ibid.), where manga aimed at a female audience were usually tales for a stereotyped female audience. Some examples are active but much more delicate figures – developed in manga and anime – such as *Candy Candy* or *Georgie*, but also the female warriors who dress in sailor outfits, i.e. *Sailor Moon* (1991-1997, written and illustrated by Naoko Takeuchi) and her team, where a new sisterhood bond and a new active, warlike protagonism of the feminine appears, but always in a 'package' that pigeonholes female readers according to aesthetic clichés. *Le rose di Versailles* proves to be extremely modern as it follows second-wave feminism and also anticipates new considerations about gender, foreshadowing the third-wave feminism movement (Hirozane, 2022: 13).

3. AT THE DAWN OF THE 21ST CENTURY: GRAPHIC NARRATIVES BEYOND STEREOTYPES

We have already observed how literature featuring women has historically been based not only on the textual literary medium but also on formats that rely on the use of images, such as the picturebook or comic. With regard to the picturebook, in the new millennium competent and attentive publishers gain a foothold through a sophisticated aesthetic and a predilection for stories that can encourage young readers to explore human and social complexity from an early age (Biemmi, 2018; Forni, 2022). We can therefore recall publishing houses such as Topipittori, Orecchio Acerbo, Fatatrac, Carthusia, and Kite; publishers that know how to fascinate both young and old readers thanks to their valuable literary works, which are often oriented towards revisiting gender canons in an indirect but effective way. Besides, different series and publishing houses have made the fight against stereotypes their editorial manifesto, such as Settenove, and the Sottosopra series by EDT- Giralangolo and, with particular regard to the family dimension, Lo Stampatello. These editorial projects are not simply aimed at a new female protagonism but rather welcome different portraits, including male ones or depictions that go beyond gender dichotomies, so as to offer a varied literary scenario in line with the most recent trends in Gender Studies, for instance concerning the deconstruction of male stereotypes as well.

These publishers offer stories that focus on a re-evaluation of the canon from early childhood, according to recurring structures whose goal is de-

1 Other manga on the issue are *Orpheus* by Riyoko Ikeda (1975-1981), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* by Hayao Miyazaki (1982-1994), *Ranma ½* (1987-1999) by Takahashi Rumiko.

constructing common sexist stereotypes and educate to the valorisation of differences. Starting from Settenove, some key titles are *Selvaggia* by Emily Hughes, a story on the precious relationship between freedom and nature; *Io sono così* by Fulvia Degl'Innocenti and Antonio Ferrara, an illustrated fold-out book that tells the story of a character by defining him/her through his/her passions, and only afterward through his/her gender; or *Una stanza tutta per me* by Serena Ballista and Chiara Carrer, inspired by Virginia Woolf's biographical events. Or, considering *EDT- Giralangolo*, *La principessa e il drago* by Robert Munsch, a picturebook that overturns the traditional dynamic that sees the prince as the saviour to provide the image of a princess aesthetically and temperamentally outside the canon; *Sono una ragazza!* by Yasmeen Ismail, which reminds us of the fragility of some simple labels that are not sufficient to constrain us in strict gender norms; *Il trattore della nonna* by Anselmo Roveda, which portrays a new female elderly figure at work in the fields on her tractor, while not sacrificing the aesthetic and self-care sphere.

These books act according to a defined purpose right from their covers. Because of their specific focus on gender issues, they position themselves as works that straddle the line between the pleasure of reading and educational literature. Their experimentation is powerful, entertaining and functional, although, in some cases, the dynamic in which the main 'peculiar' character is introduced is still excessively bound to tradition. Of course, some exceptions show stories directly representing unproblematic characters. However, as in the first thematic volumes of the Seventies, anti-canonical characters are often forced to clash with a world that does not accept them, starting right from their families, often described as very traditional, for example through father figures unwilling to re-evaluate the canon, especially when it comes to non-canonical male portraits (*Una bambola per Alberto*, Tito Lupotti).

Similarly, adult or secondary characters often fit into a more conservative canon and create a strong generational gap. The message conveyed in some of the books seems to encourage boys and girls to dream of a future without gender barriers, but the adult examples they offer frequently fall into typified models that are unable to fully deconstruct gender imaginary and to provide concrete inspirational figures related to adulthood. This is the case, for instance, of *Amelia che sapeva volare*, a picturebook by Mara Dal Corso and Daniela Volpari that tells the true story of Amelia Earhart. In this book, we read of a little girl who is unconventional in her dress, personality, appearance, hobbies and dreams. Amelia wants to fly, and the male members of her family support her while following this desire. In a particularly significant image, Amelia's father accompanies her on a roller coaster, while her mother, from below, silently holds a blue balloon and looks at the two having fun together (Figure 1). Although contextualising this adventure in the early 1900s, the figure of the mother appears as extremely silenced, a detail that clashes with the true narrative reported at the end of the book in a biographical note on the protagonist. There, it is

specified that Amelia’s passion was encouraged by her mother, who was herself outside the female canon, although brought back to the norm in the biographical adaptation proposed by the book. The mother, therefore, waits without taking part in the fun of adventure, showing a “feminine sedentariness” that visually recalls some illustrations far in the past, such as *The Mellops go flying* by Tomi Ungerer (1957) (Trisciuzzi, 2020: 79).



Figure 1 – Amelia che sapeva volare

Therefore, if the protagonists appear emancipated and capable of generating new empowerment, the framework in which the story develops still suffers from prejudices that should be dismantled so as not to make these portraits exceptional, but part of an inclusive and non-judgmental society. Differences should be presented not as an achievement to be gained by overcoming obstacles, but as part of a common social experience. The newest editorial approaches no longer propose stereotyped situations that are then deconstructed, but immediately depict innovative characters and situations that are well integrated into the fictitious context, thereby avoiding damaging images that, even when re-evaluated through the development of the plot, continue to populate our collective imagination.

Whereas picturebooks are attempting a deconstruction of gender canons, an even more flourishing and qualitatively relevant field is that of comics. Having historically entered the world of children and teenagers’ publishing in the early 20th Century, for example with *Corriere dei Piccoli*, comics have been developing multifaceted female characters, constructed between emancipation and tradition (Beseghi, 1987). However, the comic world has traditionally privileged male figures, often trapped in detrimental stereotypes associated with virility and hyper-masculinity – for instance in superheroes narratives. In Marvel and DC universes, some female narratives have gained ground over the years, amidst new representations

and major critical points often due to an assumed male target audience (Brambilla *et al.*, 2021).

In particular, graphic novels – i.e. novels developed through the comic book code – constitute an area that involves different age groups (including childhood, adolescence and adulthood) and has been growing and growing over the last two decades. Like any literary form, graphic novels give voice to marginalised groups or other identities, create identification and empathy, and in doing so they are additionally sustained by their images' strong visual power (McCloud, 1993: 42; Barsotti & Cantatore, 2019).

A first glance at the graphic novels published in Italy shows interesting perspectives on female representations, demonstrating a space for experimentation that is receptive to new transformations in comparison to other narrative formats. First of all, in graphic novels we find a good presence of females: if studies on other literary forms indicate a clear male majority (Biemmi, 2012), graphic novels offer numerous portraits of girls and women whose femininity is not necessarily canonical or opposed to the male in a binary approach. In addition, precisely because of the variety of the proposed depictions, many of the graphic novels for children and adolescents escape the strict gender targeting that characterises other products for the youngest. So, Italian publishing houses specialised in comics frequently provide young readers with new messages, models and sensibilities. One of the most popular graphic novels, which today ranks among the classics, is the autobiographical story of a girl: *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2000/2007), where the growth of the protagonist, an Iranian girl, intertwines the desire for rebellion and the clash with the precepts of fundamentalism. The revolution shown by *Persepolis* assumes the tones of a female claim for freedom.

Within the Italian publishing scene of the last few years, two publishers stand out as capable of offering anti-canonical portraits to readers, namely Bao Publishing and Tunué. The former, founded in 2009 in Milan, offers both Italian and translated works in a highly heterogeneous catalogue in terms of genres, topics, and approaches, with a strong sensitivity to themes likely to thrill the reader and encourage profound reflections. Bao Publishing does not select a direct approach to gender issues, and this is precisely the strength of their works: overcoming moralism and didacticism, their stories 'Italia che cambia', in Liber, nries portray the world as it is, without forcing a change, but simply representing it in its various facets. The catalogue shows a good presence of female or anti-canonical characters, collecting works by authors capable of representing a wide spectrum of identities, sensibilities, and perceptions².

One of the many examples to be mentioned is *Viola Giramondo* by Teresa Radice and Stefano Turconi (2017/2020), a graphic novel that depicts a little girl that overcomes many stereotypes. First of all, *Viola* is not characterized by any visual marker of femininity: while using feminine pronouns, she is

2 Some of the graphic novels presenting interesting female identities are: Aragno, 2019; Brosgol, 2013; Pearson, 2014; Radice & Turconi, 2018; Stevenson, 2016; Wang, 2021.

rather configured as a person, drawing on the uniqueness of the individual beyond gender stereotypes. Viola Vermeer lives with a circus, is 12 years old, has blond curls to symbolize her exuberance, and wears comfortable clothes in cheerful colours that cannot be ascribed to precise gender standards, with rare exceptions. She is a dreamy and reflective child, facing the coming adolescence with curiosity and enthusiasm. Viola is the daughter of an insect-taming entomologist and a cannon woman, a visually anticanonical couple who will raise Viola within a community that supports the girl and cares for her. With her extended family, composed of the *Cirque de la Lune* and the cultures it gathers, the girl travels the world and turns every place into her home, from Canada to France, up to the Himalayas. Every step in her journey gives the girl a new window into the world, an opportunity to re-evaluate her certainties and to appreciate diversity in all its forms. The book combines Teresa Radice's poetic text with Stefano Turconi's cheerful illustrations, which perfectly capture the fascinating diversity that populates the world: the result is a work that gives voice to a chorus of different identities through striking Disneyesque overtones.

As for Tunué, the publisher was founded in 2004 and proposes nonfiction and graphic novels for readers of different ages: in 2010, the Tipitondi series was created, where high-quality volumes for boys and girls are collected. In 2019, the Ariel series was established in order to collect stories about women. Quoting the words of the publishing house:

Ariel is a series born in 2019 with a clear guideline: that of being a meeting place in which women authors can narrate themes close to women, in an attempt to create a space where to share a feeling declined into the feminine. [...] The name chosen tells us something about the series: Ariel is the air spirit in the Shakespearean play, a character with no sexual characterization. It is precisely this ambiguity that fosters the imagination of a metaphorical meeting place between the masculine and the feminine (Tunué, 2023).

While the purpose of the series is explicit, again its books introduce the theme of femininity and gender without didactic or moralizing approaches. Moreover, Tunué also includes numerous female figures even beyond this precise series. One of the most recent examples is *Le guerriere della valle* by Jonathan Garnier and Amélie Fléchais (2022), where the female narrative is declined into a sisterhood and brotherhood relationship that supports a fight aimed at the discovery of the young characters' origins and their personal and social identity. Therefore, the female line is not kept in a particular niche of the publishing project: telling compelling, exciting stories remains the main purpose of Tunué's books, which act toward a change in social models resulting from the authors' sensibility and not from an overtly didactic approach.

A significant example from Ariel series is *Per sempre* by Assia Petricelli and Sergio Riccardi (2020), a graphic novel for both teenagers and adults set in a hot summer that serves as the background for the meeting of Viola and Ireneo. Viola is a girl overly concerned with other people's judgments

and is spending her vacation with her parents, while Ireneo is a quiet and sensitive local boy. Their friendship – and successively love relationship – brings forth a profound reflection on inter-gender bonds, on adolescent bodies and insecurities, on the true meaning of love. The main story between the two protagonists is punctuated by other important identity and relational narratives, such as the love story between two elderly female tourists, one of whom is terminally ill with cancer, or the violent affair between Viola's friend, Valeria, and Gabriele, where dangerous warning signs are described, together with the possibility of detaching from toxic relationships.

4. FINAL NOTE

Italian book publishing has undergone great changes in recent decades with regard to the representation of girls and women and more generally with respect to gender standards. Since the Seventies, children's literature has been populated with empowering and emancipatory portraits, whose most salient features, formats and editorial milestones have been explored in the paper. However, the literary field, and mostly mass literature, remains full of traditional representations, dense with clichés and prejudices that hold back the ongoing emancipatory process. Literature is a powerful tool for deconstructing socially shared imagination as it gives the opportunity to invite young readers to reflect both on themselves and on the world surrounding them (Beseghi, 1987; Biemmi, 2012; Barsotti, 2013). Narratives that are open to diversity hold great pedagogical potential as they encourage strong identification, empathetic contact with otherness, and create a window to the world and a mirror by which to observe ourselves (Bishop, 1990). To reach constructive and egalitarian social change, we need books that can both keep up with the times and anticipate future experiences, accompanying young readers on the complex journey of growth and self-discovery through multifaceted and welcoming representations that give voice to minorities and to new ways of being and feeling.

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