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Femal-active: female role models

and characters throughout time

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Ad Annina,
sai perché.

Index

Introduction

«From the beginning, the feminist critique of fairy tales has centered on depictions
of the fairy-tale heroine. Perhaps it was inevitable that the fictional stereotype
identified in classic fairy tales would also become a critical stereotype»
(Haase 2006: X)

The research explores the evolution of female characters in children's literature and transmediatic storytelling, focusing on representation of female characters in fairy tales, animation and media which children are in contact with. Scholars like Vladimir Propp and Bruno Bettelheim studied the significance of fairy tales and stated that these tales were and are a symbolic language to guide children through their growth. Nowadays children are in touch with more technological storytelling, therefore it is mandatory for pedagogy, psychology, education and literature scholars to focus on every media available to children. This research explores representation of female characters in a few case studies and emphasizes their changing portrayal through time and media, also after the influence of feminism and post-feminism.

The aim of this thesis is to show some examples of female representation and role models in transmediatic children's literature. For this reason, there are going to be many examples and discussions about how women are perceived in society, about the male and female gaze in transmediatic products and about female role models in general. This does not in any way mean that only female characters are stereotyped or discriminated. many studies have shown that male characters can also be stereotyped and also have some specific characteristics which can be negative or improved with time. However, this research also focuses on a gender-study perspective of transmediatic literature, with a specific target on female characters. Certainly, a thesis can never cover every issue of these vast matters, but the ones which are described in the present work are the ones that came out not only as interesting but also impactful.

The thesis consists of five chapters which are divided into two sections. The first one is about theoretical studies, while the second one consists of case studies.

The first and second chapter are crucial to describe both the importance of media in children's lives and of female representation from fairy tales and bildungsroman to more contemporary storytelling media. These two chapters might seem less important, but they are

necessary in order to understand the last three chapters, which are case studies that show the change in female representation through time and media.

The third chapter focuses on toys and dolls, and principally on Barbie which not only is the world's most famous doll, but also an animation and movie protagonist. The fourth chapter is about stereotypes and prototypes which women are often submitted to in storytelling and on how, also in animation, nowadays female leads are segregated into the definition of "strong female character", with a focus on Walt Disney's animation. Finally, the fifth chapter is about representation of different bodies in animation, how bodies were not usually described in fairy tales and how in the latest years different bodies started to be animated for children's products. The focus of this last case study is still going to be on Disney animation or cinematographic animation. The reason for that is the comparison made with fairy tales and, therefore, the link between the two media through the stories (the stories are the same, the storytelling and media used are different).

I am aware that many other topics may be discussed in this research, not only as examples in the case studies section, but also as fields in general. It is clear that female representation cannot only be analysed on a literary point of view. However, although some psychological, educational and pedagogical issues are mentioned, since this research is in the comparative literature field, these matters are not going to be the main focus of the thesis. Thus, the chapter about dolls and Barbie does not thoroughly describe the psychophysical and ethical issues that this toy has created and that many scholars have already analysed in the last decades (although some of them are quoted and mentioned). The chapter's aim is to analyse the use of toys and the representation of females not on a physical point of view (like chapter five) but on a role play perspective.

Another topic that I am aware is the importance of new technologies and social media in children's life. However, the risk was to go too far from comparative literature, therefore, after thorough discussions, the decision was not to add said issue in this research. Videogames were also media which could have been part of the thesis, since they are also a big part of children's lives nowadays. However, as much as social media, videogames are a completely different kind of storytelling which would have required another research approach (mainly because, differently from written stories and cinematography, videogames are made also of a first

person's perspective – the player – therefore the storytelling is very different from the others which are a part of this thesis). Moreover, this thesis focuses mainly on Western animation, since Eastern/Asian animation is a genre which has to be included into a cultural and social perspective way too far from the ones quoted in this research bibliography (which is mainly Western). Nevertheless, I know that there are many animation films and TV series, exactly as there are many books and fairy tales; however, it is not possible to use them all in one standing.

Finally, some of the books in the bibliography of this thesis which are quoted through the present work were not translated into English. Some books by Vladimir Propp, for examples, had numerous editions in Italy but not in an English-speaking country. For this reason, some quotations (also of Italian books which have never been translated in other languages) are inserted into tables in order to show the original quote and the translation of the researcher.

Part I – Theorical sources

Chapter 1 – Fairy tales and… Is transmediatic children's literature pedagogical?

«On the other hand, young people as well as teachers and teaching artists who work with such storytelling gain a whiff of possibility, a hint or trace of opportunity, to appropriate stories that become their own and endow them with hope that they can hear their own voices speak and take some control of their lives»

(Zipes 2017: 51)

Once upon a time there were stories told by parents to their children before they went to sleep. Most of the times these tales were created as cautionary tales and had a "moral" that would teach children something about life. It took a long time before these stories started being called fairy tales and, after being censored for centuries, becoming the stories we know and love today. In this chapter we are going to analyse briefly how fairy tales were born, how they are still pedagogically relevant today, what this relevance means and what kind of storytelling children experience nowadays, given the fact that books and stories are not the main source of fruition anymore. But what are fairy tales? According to Stefano Calabrese in the book *Letteratura per l'infanzia* (Children's literature 2011), it is a form of communication:

La fiaba, il racconto folklorico di origine orale e più tardi il fantasy costituiscono una forma di comunicazione privilegiata degli adulti con i bambini, nel presupposto che questi ultimi siano ancora cognitivamente incapaci di distinguere il reale dall'immaginario e il possibile dall'impossibile, l'agire di un personaggio orientato a uno scopo in base a ciò che ritiene di poter fare dall'agire di un personaggio che si avvale di strumenti magici […]. Nondimeno la libertà immaginativa che essa consente, la netta divisione del bene dal male e la nitidezza degli accadimenti non spiegano a sufficienza perché la fiaba si iscriva da subito all'albo della letteratura per l'infanzia, sin dal momento in cui Giambattista Basile dedica il suo Cunto de li cunti ai "peccerille", cioè ai fanciulli, e Perrault attribuisce finzionalmente la paternità dei suoi contes de fées al giovane figlio Pierre Darmancourt. (Calabrese 2011: 16)	The fairy tale, the folk story of oral origin and later fantasy fiction create a privileged form of adult communication with children, on the assumption that the latter are still cognitively incapable of distinguishing the real from the imaginary and the possible from the impossible, the action of a character oriented towards a goal based on what he thinks he can do from the action of a character who uses magical tools […]. Nonetheless the imaginative freedom that it allows, the clear division of good from evil and the sharpness of the events do not sufficiently explain why the fairy tale is immediately enrolled in the children's literature register, from the moment in which Giambattista Basile dedicates his Cunto de li cunti to the "peccerille" (A/N "The tale of the tales" to "children" – peccerille is neapolitan dialect for children), i.e. children, and Perrault fictionally attributes the paternity of his contes de fées to his young son Pierre Darmancourt.

Fairy tales do have ancient roots. Although they could not yet be called fairy tales, since the genre developed in the last few centuries, stories with a moral existed and one of the most

famous examples of a writer who wrote what we define fables, and not yet fairy tales, was Aesop[1]. The fortunate and well-known stories of the Greek fabulist are still told today (some of these being *The Fox and the Craw* or *The Lion and the Mouse*) even though it is evident that those simple tales are far from the stories that children are used to listen in the contemporary society, we still use those stories and enjoy their simplicity.

It took several centuries to start to talk about fairy tales, although still today many scholars prefer to call them wonder tale from the German word *Märchen*. Also known as part of the folklore of European countries, fairy tales became a genre around the 17th century (Calabrese 2013). Since this new genre of tales did not have just one source, scholars tried to study and explain this new kind of tale and the meaning behind such mysterious stories. One of these scholars was Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp[2] who wrote in his 1928 book *Исторические корни волшебной сказки* (The historical roots of fairy tales, which was never translated in English) the following statement:

Sebbene i racconti di fate costituiscano una parte del folclore, essi non sono peraltro una parte inseparabile dal tutto. Non sono quel che è la mano nei confronti del corpo o la foglia nei confronti dell'albero. Pur essendo una parte, costituiscono un tutto a sé. (Propp 1972: 36)	Although fairy tales are a part of folklore, they are not an inseparable part of the whole. Fairy tales are not what the hand is to the body or the leaf to the tree. Despite being a part, they form a whole in themselves.

Fairy tales, therefore, were born as a new kind of tales, different from fables, which were written with a didactic moral. These new folktales were stories with their own characteristics, their own storytelling and they mainly had their roots in European folklore, in legends and myths that were already well known worldwide (Calabrese, 1997). More specifically, «[...] The Fairy tale is a short narration in prose work. Its origins can be from folklore or literature, and it does not have the same ethical and didactic aim of the fable, which usually represents its characters and actions in a non-realistic way» (ivi: 1).

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[1] Aesop, in Greek Αἴσωπος, Aísōpos, was born around the year 620 BCE and died aged 56 the year 564 in Delphi. He was a famous storyteller in Greek times and, although it is not sure that the fables known as Aesop's fables are all his, they are attributed to him and known worldwide.
[2] Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp was a Russian scholar and folklorist who analysed the basic structural elements of both folk tales and Russian folk tales. He was born April 29, 1895, in St. Petersburg and died August 22 1970 in Leningrad.

These are the questions scholars posed to themselves in order to investigate their origin: why are folktales the roots of fairy tales? Why did tales that were about legends and myths generate fantasy stories with fantastic features but had characteristics that were more imaginative and astonishing? Vladimir Propp tried to answer to these questions in his book *Исторические корни волшебной сказки* (The historical roots of fairy tales). «The fairy tale has preserved traces not only of representations of death but also of a once widespread rite, namely the rite of initiation of young people at the onset of puberty» (from the Italian translation: "Il racconto di fate ha conservato le tracce non solo di rappresentazioni della morte ma anche di un rito un tempo largamente diffuso, vale a dire il rito dell'iniziazione dei giovani al sopraggiungere della pubertà.") (Propp 1972: 89). Scholars found that fairy tales derived from old folk tales that populations used before sending their youngsters (usually males) to initiation rituals. Many folk tales about these rituals where about monsters hiding in the woods or caverns which were the home of demonic creatures. Those tales were used to scare and warn children so that, once they had gone through the ritual, they would become adults. The ritual would often consist in crossing the woods or entering and escaping a cavern; however, after such rituals the child would come back as an adult. These initiation rituals were, for scholars such as Propp, the roots of what we know today as fairy tales (ibidem). The journey that soon to be adults had to physically go through became the source of folk tales and, later, of fairy tales. For this very reason, therefore, many if not almost every fairy tale has a journey which is told through the plot. Propp was not the only scholar who studied the matter, as we said. Bruno Bettelheim[3], for example, also studied and spoke very frequently about fairy tales and, as he states in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*:

> Those fairy tales which, like "The Sleeping Beauty," have the period of passivity for their central topic, permit the budding adolescent not to worry during his inactive period: he learns that things continue to evolve. The happy ending assures the child that he will not remain permanently stuck in seemingly doing nothing, even if at the moment it seems as if this period of quietude will last for a hundred years. After the period of inactivity which typically occurs during early puberty, adolescents become active and make up for the period of passivity; in real life and in fairy tales they try to prove their young manhood or womanhood, often through dangerous adventures. This is how the symbolic language of the fairy tale states that after having gathered strength in solitude they now have to become themselves. (Bettelheim 1975: 401)

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[3] Bruno Bettelheim was an Austrian psychologist, scholar and public intellectual. He spent most of his academic career in the United States. He was born in Vienna August 28, 1903, and died in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA March 13, 1990.

Fairy tales, therefore, historically helped children to become adults. Children had to pass through puberty and adolescence to become full grown adults and that period is physically and psychologically challenging. For this reason, fairy tales often describe situations as adventures, as an allegory of a human's journey through a changing moment of life. Since these tales started becoming popular and were told mainly to children, although they amazed adults too because of their fantastical nature and magical topics, writers from all Europe started creating these stories more often and, as we already stated, most of the time they were about incredible adventures. As Max Lüthi[4] suggested: «[...] The folktale is a world-encompassing adventure story told in a swift, sublimating style. With unrealistic ease, it isolates its figures and knits them together» (Lüthi 1982: 82). Several authors of fairy tales are still well known today, such as Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers or Hans Christian Andersen, but the scholars and writers who helped creating and outlining this new genre of literature have been (and still are) numerous. As Stefano Calabrese observed in his 2011 introduction to the book *Letteratura per l'infanzia* (Children's literature), fairy tales became, throughout centuries, stories that were the opposite of what novels were in those years, that is, stories simulating every day's reality. However, for these types of stories to be accepted by society we would have had to wait for a long time.

Nondimeno, la fiaba incontra l'infanzia anche e soprattutto perché l'infanzia inizia ad essere pensata dagli adulti come una fiaba, ma si tratta di un processo storico lento e complesso. Dopo la nascita e la stabilizzazione dei novels settecenteschi, narrazioni che simulavano la realtà quale poteva presentarsi agli occhi di qualsiasi lettore, il modello arcaico e imperituro della fiaba acquisisce il valore di una liberatoria dalle costrizioni della razionalità e della vita reale, uscendo lentamente dai canoni delle letture che gli adulti si concedevano. Solo con i Grimm, e a un prezzo elevatissimo, verrà firmato un armistizio di compromesso tra il necessario del Reale e l'impossibile del Meraviglioso; ma nel Settecento il clima è ancora quello di una sordida guerra. (Calabrese 2011: 18)	Nonetheless, the fairy tale meets childhood because childhood begins to be thought by adults as a fairy tale, but it is actually a slow and complex historical process. After the birth and stabilization of eighteenth-century novels, narratives that simulated reality as it could present itself to the eyes of any reader, the archaic and imperishable model of the fairy tale acquires the value of a liberation from the constraints of rationality and real life, slowly leaving the canons of the readings that adults allowed themselves. Only with the Grimms, and at a very high price, will a compromise armistice be signed between the necessary of the Real and the impossible of the Marvelous; but in the eighteenth century the climate was still that of a sordid war.

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[4] Max Lüthi was born in Bern, March 11, 1909, and died in Zurich, June 20, 1991. He was a Swiss literary theorist known for his work on folktales.

Fables and fairy tales are not the only types of stories that create children's literature. Bildungroman are also relevant to the subject. To adopt these new types of novels children's literature had to wait the end of the 18th century in Germany. Examples of very well-known bildungsroman are *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott or *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, although nowadays we do remember more contemporary ones such as *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling or the Japanese manga by Masashi Kishimoto *Naruto*. The bildungsroman also applies to the rules of the folk stories based off initiations rituals. The protagonists of these books most of the time go through a journey, change, and grow up throughout the plot of their story.

Un rilievo altrettanto e addirittura più marcato va riconosciuto alla letteratura per l'infanzia che adotta il format del romanzo di formazione o Bildungsroman, una modulazione particolare che il novel per adulti acquisisce in Germania alla fine del Settecento, quando in genere ritrae un giovane protagonista che abbandona la provincia e si trasferisce in ambiente urbano per esplorare le proprie capacità: proficuo o ostile che esso si manifesti, il nuovo contesto ambientale favorisce nel protagonista la possibilità di pervenire a una maggiore saggezza e maturità. (Calabrese 2011: 23)	An equally and even more marked prominence must be recognized to children's literature which adopts the format of the Bildungsroman, a particular modulation that the novel for adults acquires in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, when it generally portrays a young protagonist who leaves the province and moves to an urban environment to explore his own abilities: whether it is profitable or hostile, the new environmental context favors in the protagonist the possibility of reaching greater wisdom and maturity.

From fables to fairy tales, to bildungsroman, the next and more recent step became more differentiated. Nowadays we cannot say that children listen to fairy tales only if told by their parents or if read in books. There are picture books, and fairy tales' books, there are bildungsroman, but the sources from which children are told stories today are definitely not only literary anymore. Storytelling evolved enormously in the last century and with the birth of cinema, radio and television the industry started focusing also on children's products. In the following sections of the chapter, therefore, we are going to analyse not only what we mean with pedagogical relevance (in a storytelling perspective), but also what the meaning of transmediatic children's literature is (word which has been used more often in the latest decades).

1.1 Why is it crucial to speak about pedagogy in children's literature? And what do we mean by pedagogical relevance?

Growing up is not and has never been an easy task and, as a matter of fact, before Medieval times the first years of an infant's life were not really considered important (beside for a few exceptions of seldom authors and scholars such as Quintilian[5] in the Roman times) or were not often spoken about. In the latest centuries, however, a new science came up and started questioning how a child's growth should happen, throughout which agencies and in which ways this age can be helped in its evolution (Cambi, 2003). As Jerome Bruner[6] puts it: «If pedagogy is to empower human beings to go beyond their "native" predispositions, it must transmit the "toolkit" the culture has developed for doing so» (Bruner 1996: 17).

First, it is important to remind ourselves that pedagogy is a science or, as Franco Frabboni and Franca Pinto Minerva outline in their book *Introduzione alla pedagogia generale* (Introduction to general pedagogy) (2003):

[…] la pedagogia può essere interpretata come scienza di confine laddove il concetto di confine va inteso non come rigida barriera che delimita e separa ma, al contrario, come area di comune sconfinamento, in cui costruire e condividere conoscenza «tra» saperi differenti che, da punti di vista diversi (e con apparati teorici e metodologici diversi), osservano, riflettono e progettano intorno a comuni oggetti di indagine. (Frabboni, Pinto Minerva 2003: 9)	[…] pedagogy can be interpreted as a borderline science, where the idea of borderline must be seen not as a stiff barrier which separates and divides but, actually, as a common trespassing area where it is possible to build, share knowledge in between different topics and subjects, and where different perspectives (different theoretical and methodological approaches) observe, reflect and project around the same objects of study.

Since pedagogy is a borderline science and it is also a developing subject that changes through time, evolves with years, and is influenced by other knowledges (ibidem), it is not impossible for children's literature to be part of this subject's growing knowledge. It is crucial, however, to begin from the origins of pedagogy, therefore from its history. Franco Cambi in

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[5] Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilian) was a Roman educator, often referred to in medieval schools and in Renaissance writing. He was born around the year 35ca in Hispania and died around the year 100AD. Still today he is well known to be an *ante litteram* pedagogist.

[6] Jerome Bruner, born October 1, 1915, in New York City, was an American psychologist who made contributions to cognitive learning theory and educational psychology. His publications are relevant to this day and include books such as The Process of Education (1960) or The Culture of Education (1996). Bruner died in June 2016 in Manhattan.

his 2003 book *Manuale di storia della pedagogia* (Histoy of Pedagogy textbook) gave this description to the birth of this science:

La storia della pedagogia in senso proprio era nata tra Sette e Ottocento e si era sviluppata nel corso del secolo XIX come indagine svolta da uomini di scuola, impegnati nella organizzazione di una istituzione divenuta sempre più centrale nella società moderna […]Si trattava di una storia persuasiva, da un lato, e teoreticistica, dall'altro, sempre assai lontana dai processi educativi reali, relativi alle diverse società, differenziati per classi sociali, sessi ed età, dalle istituzioni in cui essi si compivano […]dalle pratiche di allevamento o d'istruzione, dagli apporti delle scienze, soprattutto umane, alla conoscenza dei processi formativi. (Cambi 2003: 7)	The history of pedagogy in its strict sense was born between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and developed during the nineteenth century as an investigation carried out by school workers, engaged in the organization of an institution that had become increasingly central in modern society [...] It was a persuasive history, on one hand, and a theoretical history, on the other, always very distant from the real educational processes, relating to different societies, differentiated by social class, sex and age, from institutions in which they were carried out […] from breeding practices or of education, from the contributions of the sciences, especially the human ones, to the knowledge of the training processes.

Pedagogy, therefore, at least at the beginning of its life, was something extremely theoretical that had a hard time trying to find an application of its theories. With time and some sharing from other topics, this discipline became more accurate and precise. The perception of pedagogy back in the days and its perception today are noticeably two different things. In the book *In cerca di guai – Studiare la letteratura per l'infanzia* (Searching for troubles – Studying children's literature) Lorenzo Cantatore and his colleagues (2020) underline the fact that the pedagogical discourse is not to be settled only in the early stages of a human's life but to the whole existence of a person.

Da una parte appare perfino scontato sottolineare l'importanza del discorso pedagogico (ormai esteso a tutto l'arco della vita) finalizzato alla costruzione di un'esistenza consapevole, autonoma e felice, dall'altra l'infanzia risulta ancora e, per certi versi, sempre più un'età piena di incognite e aspetti indecifrabili, nonché una zona sociale trascurata, quando non ignorata o addirittura violata, anche nelle forme apparentemente più morbide del controllo e di un'eccessiva protezione. (Cantatore et al., 2020: 7)	On one hand, it seems way obvious to underline the importance of pedagogical discourse (now extended to the whole of life) aimed at building a conscious, autonomous and happy existence; on the other hand, childhood is still and, in some ways, is increasingly an age full of unknown things and indecipherable aspects, as well as an often neglected social area, whenever it is not ignored or even violated, even in what appears to be softer forms of control and excessive protection.

Pedagogy is, therefore, something that has been extended through the whole length of a human life, along with the fact that nowadays it is widespread the idea that learning, educating

and studying can happen in every stage of the human life (Frabboni, Pinto Minerva, 2003). The reason why children's literature must be talked about when speaking of a pedagogical discourse is, therefore, in these following words by Cantatore.

Per noi la letteratura per l'infanzia, pur convivendo in un sistema integrato con altri media, resta e deve restare uno strumento d'educazione centrale, fondamentale, totale. Dove per "educazione" non si intende ovviamente la pura trasmissione di certi contenuti o valori, pur condivisibili, ma la possibilità di fare un'esperienza estetica. (Cantatore et al. 2020: 7)	For us, children's literature, while coexisting in an integrated system with other media, remains and must remain an educational tool which is central, fundamental, and complete. Where "education" obviously does not mean the mere transmission of certain contents or values, albeit shareable, but the possibility of having an aesthetic experience.

According to all these authors, it is certain that pedagogy became, during the last century, the centre of knowledge, the focus of a human's education and growth, regardless of the age of a person. For this exact reason it is possible to speak about pedagogical relevance when discussing about children's literature. Pedagogy is a relevant topic in every age of human life, therefore also and principally in childhood since the main education steps and learnings happen in that stage of life. Children's literature has changed deeply in the last century, as much as pedagogy, but it is still extremely relevant in the learning process and education journey of a child.

1.2 What do we mean by transmediatic children's literature?

We already saw that children's literature is a discipline that not only has a part in making pedagogy the science that it is but is also pedagogical itself. However, children's literature is also the only part of literature that is written with a precise audience in the author's mind. As Stefano Calabrese says in the introduction of the 2011 book *Letteratura per l'infanzia* (Children's literature):

[…] la letteratura per l'infanzia sarebbe invece tutto ciò che viene prodotto nella prospettiva di una utenza inequivocabilmente identificata dagli scrittori prima ancora che abbia luogo l'atto creativo della scrittura. Dunque testi *reader-oriented*, cioè pensati nella prospettiva di un lettore che costituirebbe l'autentico protagonista e – come voleva Hans Robert Jauss, il teorico dell'atto della ricezione quale centro propulsore della letteratura – quasi il co-autore dei testi di	[…] children's literature would instead be everything that is produced in the perspective of a user unequivocally identified by the writers even before the creative act of writing takes place. Therefore reader-oriented texts are texts conceived in the perspective of a reader who would constitute the authentic protagonist and – as Hans Robert Jauss, the theorist of the act of reception as the driving force of literature wanted – almost the co-

| cui si rifiuta di essere un passivo, trascurabile fruitore. (Calabrese 2011: p. 8) | author of the texts of which refuses to be a passive, negligible user. |

If we consider other types of literature such as drama, comedy, or crime, they do not have a targeted audience, while children's literature (and later also the more recent young adult literature) is targeted to a specific audience. The reason is undoubtedly intertwined with what we already stated about this discipline being pedagogical. Children's literature was born, as Cantatore et al. stated[7], as an educational instrument, which supports children's growth and learning. However, although up until a few decades ago the only way a child or infant could benefit of children's literature was though books and picture books, fairy tales and fables, and maybe some toys, it is evident that nowadays these are not the only instruments existing. Speaking about picture books, for examples, which became a relevant educational tool only in recent times, as Ilaria Tontardini said in the book *In cerca di guai – Studiare la letteratura per l'infanzia* (Searching for troubles – Studying children's literature), in particular in her chapter *Asimmetrie – Albo illustrato, immagine e parola* (Asymmetries – Illustrated book, image and word), it is important to state the fact that books with pictures being the main part of the storytelling instead of words were already a great revolution for this literary genre.

| Tutta la letteratura e tutta la letteratura per l'infanzia è fatta d'immagini. Di quest'ultima un piccolo pezzetto è costituito anche di libri in cui le figure ci sono veramente, sono state disegnate e poi stampate, e condividono lo spazio della pagina e il senso del racconto con le parole. Di albi illustrati e dell'importanza di riconoscerne una specificità linguistica si è molto dibattuto negli ultimi vent'anni, anni in cui abbiamo assistito a un rifiorire dell'attenzione e della produzione con le figure, e l'albo è diventato di moda. (Cantatore et al. 2020: 177) | All literature and all children's literature are made up of images. A small piece of the latter is also made up of books in which the figures really exist, they were drawn and then printed, and they share the space of the page and the sense of the story with words. There has been much debate about picture books and the importance of recognizing their linguistic specificity in the last twenty years, years in which we have witnessed a revival of attention and production with pictures, and the picture book has become fashionable. |

Children living in the contemporary world have, nonetheless, new ways of listening to storytelling and picture books were nothing but the first step to what happened in the last decades. Although picture books are a more recent fashionable way to tell stories to infants, however, they definitely are not the only way storytelling is told to children nowadays. Today's children use media such as films, tv series, internet, and videogames to listen to stories and

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[7] Cf: chapter 1.1

every different instrument or story "carrier" has different characteristics which focus on different purposes for infant's growth and education (Calabrese, 2013).

Transmediatic children's literature is extremely vast. In this thesis the main sources are fairy tales but also toys that children have been using in the last decades (compared to some antique games and toys that infants used centuries ago) and animated films, which are nowadays more often used as story tellers than books. Animated films are certainly not the only cinematographic or television products that children see and watch; however, they are a part of children's literature since, at least in the Western society, the majority of television animation and some of the cinematographic one is thought and made for children. It is important to underline that although animation in its whole is often wrongly labeled as *only* for children, it evidently is not always the case. Eastern animation is more often than not created for adults and also a part of Western animation is not made only for children. If it is obvious that products such as *Peppa Pig* are made for educational purposes in the early stages of learning (therefore, for children), films such as Disney Pixar's *Soul* or *Inside Out* have different layers in them which are often not obvious to a younger audience. Parts of these products can still be for children, but the film itself is more comprehensible by adults. Other products such as *Josei* or *Seinen* anime[8] (Japanese "cartoons") are, on the other hand, thought merely for adults and are not proper for a young audience. Shige and Stewart perfectly stated the targeted audience in manga (and therefore in anime) in their book *Manga: A Critical Guide*:

> The Japanese manga industry has segmented the market based on genres and target readerships, including the four most well-known classifications—*shōnen* (boys), *shōjo* (girls), *seinen* (young adult men/adult men), and *josei* (adult women)—although these categorical boundaries have been increasingly traversed by readers following their own interests. Manga books and magazines are deeply embedded in people's everyday lives, found not only in bookstores and libraries but also in convenience stores and at neighborhood cafés, hair salons, dentists' waiting rooms, and laundromats, among other places. Manga—or, more precisely, comic strips—also appear in daily newspapers, regular magazines, and literary journals, and on posters and public announcements common at train stations and bus stops, and so on. (Shige, Stewart 2023: 2)

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[8] In Japan illustrated and animated product are ectremely popular. Manga (Japanese comix) and Anime (Japanese cartoons) are differentiated by age. Therefore a *Kodomo* anime or manga (such as *Pokémon*) is for children, a *Shonen* anime or manga (such as *Naruto* by Masashi Kishimoto) is for boys from their prepuberal age, a *Shoujo* anima or manga (such as *Sailor Moon* by Naoko Takeuchi) is for girls from their prepuberal age, a *Seinen* anime or manga (such as *Monster* by Naoki Urasawa) are for men, while a *Josei* anime or manga (such as *Nana* by Ai Yazawa) is for women. Manga and anime are divided also in other ways (by their topics for examples), but the differentiation by age is mainly this one.

Why do we underline this concept? This is because it is well documented that animation is only for children. This concept, however, is vastly outmoded. In this thesis we are going to analyse principally animated products, beside fairy tales and stories, therefore it is important to state this premise before starting to examine case studies. The animated products that are going to be analysed in this work are all usually targeted for a younger audience, however, not all the films and tv series examined are only for children, that might be the main target, but the product is usually suitable for adults too. Cartoons' target is also a really interesting topic to study and learn about; however, it would be extremely dispersive to analyse it thoroughly in this thesis.

It is recognised that children nowadays are not only subjected to literature and cinematography. New technologies play a crucial role in childhood, and newborns are considered as "digital native". In this era, children handle smartphones and tablets even before being toddlers and therefore have an early impact with the Internet and the use of technologies. Although not everything on the Internet could be defined as pedagogically relevant (we could actually say the exact opposite) there are a few products that can be considered as a part of children's literature. Videos for children or learning apps are just some of learning devices available for children on app stores or general platforms. However, since this thesis is focuses mainly on characters, this part of technological and interactive devices available to children will not be dealt with.

To sum up, since pedagogy evolves through time and with the evolution of children, also children's literature and, therefore, transmediatic children's literature, adapts itself to the time we live in. A 2023 child will never have the same experience or play time or storytelling that a 19th century child or a 3rd century child had. The present thesis will not analyse the use of internet and social media in children's growth and education. It is definitely a relevant topic that should not be forgotten or left behind, principally because children's self-perception, socialization and gender representation is also learnt and lived through social media. However, it is such an ethical, psychological and sociologically relevant issue that it would go beyond our aim, which is to sum up and describe certain representative female characters in the main sources of children's literature. This thesis examines female characters in said stories and products; it is going to partially analyses feminism in storytelling and how the concept of women changed through time in transmediatic literature (along with society). Therefore, this dissertation deals with some parts of both the ethical and sociological themes of said topics;

including a whole section about social media would have diverted the whole thesis from its main aim. In the next chapter a thorough analysis of the advent of feminism in children's literature will be discussed, by taking into account fairy tales and, later on, animation and transmediatic storytelling.

Chapter 2 – Children's literature and female characters. A matter of representation

«We all have fantasy, and through fantasy we seek to encounter the voids in our lives by generating visions of how we want to live and realize whatever potential we have. […] Our fantasies must be channeled through the spectacular to curb our critical thinking and creative work»
(Zipes 2009: 90)

It is no easy task to describe children's literature in one standing. As we already stated in chapter one, fairy tales, which are a relevant part of children's literature, are a product of centuries of oral storytelling and other folkloristic tales. Seth Lerer says in his introduction to the 2008 book *Children's literature a reader's history, from Aesop to Harry Potter*:

> Greek and Roman educational traditions grounded themselves in reading and reciting poetry and drama. Aesop's fables lived for two millennia on classroom and family shelves. And thinkers from Quintilian to John Locke, from St. Augustine to Dr. Seuss, speculated on the ways in which we learn about our language and our lives from literature. The history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back. (Lerer 2008: 1)

Children literature existed for centuries without having a real definition since, as Lerer says, the history of this literary genre is intertwined with childhood's conception and definition. However, the difference between children's literature and every other kind of existing literatures is mainly, as Calabrese states[9] in his 2011 book *Letteratura per l'infanzia* (Children's literature), the fact that the former is written for a specific audience, while the other kinds are not. Fairy tales and *bildungsroman* are the two principal products of children's literature (which nowadays, in what is a fully digital world, is not declined anymore only in traditional written literature[10]. Animation, cinematography and media are part of children's daily lives and therefore can also be a part of this discipline).

However, it is crucial to state and determine not only what a folktale (or fairy tale) is but also to speak about its characters (and the characters which were created in bildungsroman too). Numerous scholars tried to define and research fairy tales and its characteristics, in order to have a prototype. However, why do some scholars use the term fairy tales while others use the

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[9] C.f. Chapter 1 page 16.
[10] C.f. Chapter 1, definition of transmediatic children's literature and the reason why we cannot only conceive literature as part of it.

term folktales? Jack Zipes (2011) explains this impasse while quoting Nadine Jasmin's research.

> The difficulty in defining the fairy tale stems from the fact that storytellers and writers never used the term fairy tale until Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy coined it in 1697 when she published her first collection of tales. She never wrote a word about why she used the term. Yet it was and is highly significant that she chose to call her stories contes de fées, literally "tales about fairies."[11] (Zipes 2011: 222)

Thus, fairy tales or folktales have been studied for centuries, although different terms have been used. One of the most famous researchers was Vladimir Propp with two crucial books of his bibliography being *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) and *Historical Roots of the wonder tale* (1946). But beside knowing the etymology of the definitions of said part of literature, what is a fairy tale (or folk tale)? Vladimir Propp had a precise idea.

> […] we all have a clear empirical idea of what a folktale is. Perhaps we preserve poetic recollections, remembering a tale from childhood. We intuitively feel its charm, we enjoy its beauty […] In other words, it is a poetic sense that guides our understanding and evaluation of the folktale. […] The folktale's range is enormous, and studying it has required the work of several generations of scholars. The study of the folktale is not so much a discrete discipline as an independent science of encyclopedic character […] The folktale is usually studied within national and linguistic boundaries. (Propp 2012: 1-2)

On the other hand, according to Max Lüthi[12], fairy tales had no naïve or childlike origins. He thought that those stories were pure poetry (from the Greek word ποίησις[13] = production, which was seen for centuries as the highest and most solemn form of composition) and were the result of a highly developed society. Max Lüthi's comparison of fairy tales with poetry was unique, since it reminded the reader that, although fairy tales had popular and folk origins, which often came from initiation rituals[14], they became necessary throughout time for the education of the single individual. Initially, fairy tales were told orally to tell a moral to its audience. Subsequently, centuries later, these stories became the sources for numerous scholars to study the didactic, pedagogical, and psychological elements that this part of literature hid within.

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[11] While quoting Nadine Jasmin's book *Naissance du Conte Féminin: Mots et Merveilles. Les Contes de fées de Madame d' Aulnoy (1690-1698)* published in 2002.
[12] Max Lüthi was born in Bern, March 11, 1909, and died in Zurich, June 20, 1991. He was a Swiss literary theorist notable for his work on folk tales.
[13] Ποίησις, /poˈeːsis/ [pɔˈeːsɪs], poíēsis
[14] C.f. Chapter 1

Lüthi (1982) clearly discussed in his book *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* differences and similarities between fairy tales and other types of folk tales (such as myths and legends). A strong similarity Lüthi found between fairy tales and legends, for example, was the fact that they both linked the real world to the celestial one. These kinds of tales showed to the audience a connection between a supernatural world and the human creatures on earth. However, if we could use Max Lüthi's own words to describe the fairy tale or folk tale in a single sentence, it would be the following: «[...] The folktale is a world-encompassing adventure story told in a swift, sublimating style. With unrealistic ease, it isolates its figures and knits them together» (Lüthi 1982: 82).

Noticeably, fairy tales were somehow the ancestors of fantasy literature. They are, as a matter of fact, fantastic stories; however, they are not as complex as a fantasy book can be, and their characters are more stereotypical and flatter than the ones that can be found in romances.

> Further, if fairy tales, displaced as they are, reflect archaic thought, fantasy seems to reflect the postmodern human being's split and ambivalent picture of the universe. Most fantasy novels have many similarities to fairy tales. […] The essential difference between the fairy-tale hero and the fantasy protagonist is that the latter often lacks heroic features, can be scared and even reluctant to perform the task, and can sometimes fail. (Nikolajeva 2003: 140)

Before the advent of technology, children's literature was composed of fairy tales and bildungsroman. However, female characters did not have a linear tradition in these literary products. In this chapter, we are going to analyse the evolution of said characters in these products before this part of literature became transmediatic. Later in the following chapters we are going to analyse certain case studies which are going to be the consequence in contemporary transmediatic literature of these first theoretical chapters.

2.1 Girls and women in Fairy tales: what kind of characters were they?

What is clear in Lüthi's and Propp's research is that folk tales came from a long history of traditions and tales, therefore, as we already stated, the situations and the characters in those stories had to be somehow simple and immediately understandable. Firstly, Max Lüthi discovered that fairy tales ensured that the protagonist was a lonely wayfarer and explorer. According to Lüthi, the protagonist fulfills a journey in different stages throughout the plot. An important and fundamental fact is that there is never a real obstacle to the progression of the story, and no element can ever hinder the storyline of the protagonist.

Fairy tales' characters had some typical traits which had never been highlighted prior to these analyses, and it was Propp who firstly made a chart of the seven most common characteristics (or roles) of the fairy tales' characters, after having read, analysed and listed a hundred Russian folk tales in his book *Morphology of the Tale*. These roles were: the villain, the dispatcher, the helper, the princess or prize (and often her father), the donor or dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero (Propp, 1968).

Lüthi compared fairy tales with legends and realized that, while the characters and the objects' bodies showed their corporeality and their plasticity in legends (hence they could change after events like illnesses), the opposite was the case in fairy tales. Fairy tale characters, according to Lüthi, emerged as figures with no precise body, with no inner world and no temporal space surroundings. Not only are the characters' bodies impalpable, but also the objects' bodies are too (Lüthi 1982). These characteristics resulted in characters who belonged in an isolated world that existed for its own sake, which only became part of the story depending on the need of the protagonists.

> Fairy tales have their roots in archaic society and archaic thought, thus immediately succeeding myths. Myths have close connection to their bearers and folktales are "displaced" in time and space, while literary fairy tales and fantasy are definitely products of modern times. […] Traditional fairy tales generally strive to preserve the story as close to its original version as possible, even though individual storytellers may convey a personal touch, and each version reflects its own time and society. (Nicolajeva 2003: 138-139)

For these reasons, the characters, animals, or humans, result in having no physical or psychological depth. While the legends' characters can change physically or psychologically, the fairy tale characters are completely immune to anything. Whether the dangers are physical illnesses or psychological pains, the fairy tale characters remain uninfluenced by them, unless the feelings brought up by said illnesses have important ramifications for the storyline (Lüthi 1982).

It is quite typical for fairy tales' characters, however, to possess a specific trait, a nuance of their personality, which identifies their behaviors and their psyches. Somehow, this particular trait guides the characters in every decision they make throughout the story. A good example of these important traits of the characters can be found in James Matthew Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy*, written at the beginning of the 20th century, in particular in the character of *Tinker Bell*:

> […] Tink was not all bad: or, rather, she was all bad just now, but, on the other hand, sometimes she was all good. Fairies have to be one thing or the other, because being so small they unfortunately have room for one feeling only at a time. They are, however, allowed to change, only it must be a complete change. (Barrie 2004: 71)

This excerpt of Barrie's novel is quite clear: *Tinker Bell* can be totally good or totally bad, with no nuances in between (which returns to the matter of contrasts and extremes in fairy tales). The protagonists' behaviour and their exasperated characteristics remind us of the ancient Greek and Latin epithets[15].

Some examples of epithets about the personality of the protagonists of the ancient poems, could include: *pius*[16], about Virgil's hero Aeneas, or also πολύμητις[17] and πολύτροπος[18], about Homer's great character Odysseus from the Odyssey, or Ulysses in Latin. These adjectives, associated with the characters' names, typical of the Greek and Latin writing styles, described some core traits of the protagonists. Also, they were guides for them during the storyline (as happens with the characters in fairy tales). These epithets were not only guides, but they determined the behaviours of the heroes and of the other characters who had to deal with different situations.

The plots of the fairy tales often begin with the protagonists leaving their homeland to begin a journey, not only throughout the external world but sometimes also through their inner psyches. The fairy tale character does not always maintain its initial status, the entire plot establishes and creates twists to make sure that the external and inner journey of the protagonist will happen.

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[15] From the word ἐπίθετος /e.pí.the.ton/ → /eˈpi.θe.ton/ → /eˈpi.θe.ton/ = added. The *epithets* are usually names, adjectives or locutions/expressions added to a previous name. They can be connected depending on the necessity. In volumes on rhetoric, the epithets are described as subordinated accumulation figures. Their functions can be, for example, to determinate something. (Enciclopedia Treccani, Lausberg 1949: 166; Mortara Garavelli 1988: 219-220).

[16] *Pius* = from Latin, it means respectful of the human values, of the family and of the gods.

[17] Πολύμητις /po.lý.mɛː.tis/ → /poˈly.mi.tis/ → /poˈli.mi.tis/ = from the word πολύ, very and μῆτις, wise, very wise, of multiple wisdoms

[18] Πολύτροπος /po.lý.tro.pos/ → /poˈly.tro.pos/ → /poˈli.tro.pos/ = from the word πολύ, very and τροπος, way, manner, mode, style of versatile wisdoms – this translation has always been difficult for those whom studied the subject. Some believe that πολύτροπος means 'of multiple journeys' by basing the translation on the route of the word τροπος (which is τρέπω = to run, to travel). Other translators believe that this word means 'of multiple ways/expedients', so they adapt the meaning in the translation 'of versatile wisdoms'.

But what about female characters? The majority of fairy tales had men as protagonists, in particular if the story had to be an adventure it was common for the main characters to be boys or young man. As scholars (such as Vladimir Propp and Max Lüthi) observed, fairy tales were a fantastic storytelling which possibly came from the tradition of initiation rituals[19]. Therefore, since these rituals were often made for male children, it is not a surprise that the main characters in many fairy tales were boys. But again, what about girls?

> […] early feminist criticism of fairy tales […] was principally concerned with the genre's representation of females and the effects of these representations on the gender identity and behavior of children in particular. […] the idealized romantic patterns in fairy tales were also evident in mass-market reading materials intended for adult women, including erotic, ladies', and gothic fictions. The fairy tale's romantic paradigms could therefore be viewed as influential not simply in childhood but also in the lives of adult women (Haase 2004: 2-5)

This particular topic is extremely relevant for gender studies, psychology, pedagogy and literature scholars. Marie-Louise Von Franz[20], a psychologist who analysed thoroughly fairy tales, focused on how these tales were influenced by religion in the western world. Since the catholic religion does not have a relevant female representation, beside Mary who is the incarnation of perfection, people's mentality was created for years under the concept and the perception of females' stereotypes which existed in those centuries. Moreover, fairy tales were written by men who would describe women in said tales by the idea of females that society had back In their days. It is of no surprise, therefore, that female characters in fairy tales do not look realistic, since they are a product of male's perception.

> If we look for feminine archetypal models of behavior, we at once stumble over the problem that the feminine figures in fairy tales might have been formed by a man, and therefore do not represent a woman's idea of femininity but rather what Jung called the anima—that is, man's femininity. […] A feminine figure in a fairy tale with the whole story circling around it does not necessarily prove that the tale has to do with a woman's psychology. (Von Franz 1972: p. 5)

Female characters in fairy tales were often secondary, as we stated above, to male characters who would often have to travel and fulfill a journey or an adventure in order to grow or change their initial status. There were a few rare cases of female protagonists; however, as Von Franz (anno) points out, they were not realistic females but males' perspectives and narratives of how

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[19] C.f. Chapter 1, Propp described in his works how probably certain fairy tales' prompts came from indigenous rituals who sent youngsters into forests or cave to "become adults". The fairy tale is often a journey of the character which ends with the growth of the protagonist (or a substantial change in his life).
[20] Marie-Louise Von Franz was born January 4, 1915, and died February 17, 1998. She was a Swiss Jungian psychologist and scholar, known for her psychological interpretations of fairy tales.

a woman should have been. Moreover, while the male character was an active participant in his own story, the female character was often passive, as Bruno Bettelheim underlines in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

> [...] Adolescence is a period of great and rapid change, characterized by periods of utter passivity and lethargy alternating with frantic activity, even dangerous behaviour to "prove oneself" or discharge inner tension. This back-and-forth adolescent behaviour finds expression in some fairy tales by the hero's rushing after adventures and then suddenly being turned to stone by some enchantment. [...] While many fairy tales stress great deeds the heroes must perform to become themselves, "The Sleeping Beauty" emphasizes the long, quiet concentration on oneself that is also needed. During the months before the first menstruation, and often also for some time immediately following it, girls are passive, seem sleepy, and withdraw into themselves. While no equally noticeable state heralds the coming of sexual maturity in boys, many of them experience a period of lassitude and of turning inward during puberty which equals the female experience. [...] a fairy story in which a long period of sleep begins at the start of puberty has been very popular for a long time among girls and boys. [...] This is how the symbolic language of the fairy tale states that after having gathered strength in solitude they now have to become themselves [...] (Bettelheim 2010: 228-229).

Female characters, therefore, were often passive protagonists who did not move much into their own stories. They were not dynamic but static into their plots, and their surroundings would move around them (while male characters would move into their surroundings). Fairy Tales would have had to wait until the 18th century for a female character to be actually active and proactive, as feminist define many women nowadays, in their own story. It was the case of *Beauty and the Beast*. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's[21] version was the first ever officially released with this title. Why with this title? Because as Don Hahn, producer of Walt Disney's animation feature film Beauty and the Beast from 1991, said: «Beauty and the Beast really is a "tale as old as time". Scholars trace the story back to the legend of Cupid and Psyche […] it's The Frog Prince, it's The Phantom of the Opera. It's a story that exists in every culture, from Japan to Native Americans. It deals with concerns that are universal […]» (Solomon 2017: 17). Villeneuve's version was not the first one but it was the first official fairy tale with this title.

This tale was not part of a collection of stories, but it was released on its own. Villeneuve's version was published in 1740 in *La Jeune Américaine et les contes marins* (The Young American and Marine Tales) and it was a one hundred pages long story meant for an adult audience, since her version wanted to condemn the condition of women back in those days.

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[21] Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve was born November 28, 1685, and died December 29, 1755. She was a French novelist influenced by Madame d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault.

Villeneuve's version of *Beauty and the Beast* wanted to report and denounce to her audience that women had to get married young and had to accept the decisions that men made for them (Zipes 2009).

As Dean Donald Haase says in his book *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, «Jack Zipes analyzed French versions of "Beauty and the Beast" and European variants of "Cinderella" to show how these literary tales, in the service of the civilizing process, had reformulated themes involving gender and sexuality, thereby deviating from the oral folktales that had originated in matriarchal societies» (Haase 2004: 15). Although *Beauty and the Beast* still had certain controversial concepts, such as the fact that the protagonist was "sold" to the Beast by her father – and therefore passed from being the possession of a father to being the possession of a stranger, was an extremely subversive tale, given the time it was written in.

Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's[22] version of *Beauty and the Beast* was published in France in 1757 and only three years later, in 1760 it was translated in English as a part of the anthology *Young Ladies' Magazine or Dialogues between a Discreet Governess and Several Young Ladies of the First Rank under Her Education.* Beaumont's version leaves out a lot of characters from the original Villeneuve's story and goes back into the fantastic world of fairy tales, making it a more children's friendly story.

As a matter of fact, Max Lüthi thoroughly dealt with fairy tales in his research and, as stated in the following excerpt, he described how folktales are extremely precise into their clarity. «The real world shows us a richness of different hues and shadings. Blended colors are far more frequent than pure tones. By contrast, the folktale prefers clear, ultrapure colors: gold, silver, red, white, black, and sometimes blue as well. Gold and silver have a metallic luster, black and white are nonspecific contrasts, and red is the least subtle of all colors and the first to attract the attention of infants» (Lüthi 1947, eng. tr.: 27-28). Fairy tales, therefore, were clear, defined and did not have a lot of space for multi-faceted characters or plots. *Beauty and the Beast* was an interesting attempt at giving a female character an active persona and plot instead of a passive one.

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[22] Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont was born April 26, 1711, and died September 8, 1780. She was a French novelist who wrote the best-known version of Beauty and the Beast.

Thus, it is not by chance that Perrault and the women writers of the 1690s created their fairy tales for the most part to express their views about young people and to prepare them for roles that they idealistically believed they should play in society. Since the fairy tales of Perrault and the women writers of the salons were created at the point in history when more and more European writers began composing explicitly for children as separate entities and when standards were first being set for the development of modern children's literature, their works must be viewed as part of a larger social phenomenon. (Zipes 2006: p. 30)

The limit of fairy tales and, therefore, of fairy tales' characters, is the fact that folktales are, as Lüthi says, «Rather, by virtue of the definition and clarity of their size, shape, color, and material composition, these beings have become representatives of the folktale's extremely stylized form» (Lüthi 1947, eng. tr.: 69). Plots and elements of fairy tales are stereotyped and simplified in order for the storytelling to be as straightforward as possible. Moreover, the characters and stories are also contextualized into the society that the author himself was part of. Therefore, although with certain exceptions, female characters in fairy tales had little room (if no room at all) to be more positive than this and the attempts made to have more proactive characters were already interesting steps. It is not, however, the case with the bildungsroman characters, which we are going to mention in the next section of this chapter.

2.2 Bildungsroman: where the female character really had a change of purpose.

Children's literature is not only composed by fairy tales. As already stated, bildungsroman is another important part, with William Goethe's works (such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*) being some of the first novels of this literary genre. Novels were written only by men for a long time and often had male protagonists. This narrative changed around the 17th-18th century. Aphra Behn[23] was one of the first, if not the first, women who lived as a paid writer, and therefore managed «to earn her living solely by her pen» (Todd 2017: 9). As Janet Todd writes in her biography of this author (which was published for the first time in 1996), «Behn was also an innovative writer of fiction and a translator of science and French romance» (Todd 2017: 9).

However, some of the most famous female novelists who changed the vision of female writers and protagonists appeared more than a century later: Jane Austen[24] in the 18th century,

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[23] Aphra Behn was born December 14, 1640, and died April 16, 1689. She was an English playwright, poet, prose writer and translator.
[24] Jane Austen was born December 16, 1775, and died July 18, 1817. She was an English novelist. She published her novels under the pseudonym "A Lady".

for instance, or the Brontë sisters[25] in the 19th century. These writers were definitely *ante litteram* feminists, who wrote novels, although it was prohibited for women to write back in those days. For this exact reason, Austen signed her books for most of her life as "a lady" and not with her birth name. However, this choice was different from the Brontë sisters' who decided to sign themselves as men writers (their pseudonyms were Currer, Ellis and Acton). Austen made a different and powerful statement. Although there was no official name on the manuscripts nor on the published books, she made clear to the readers that the author was a woman, that whoever wrote those stories was female.

Although when speaking of 18th and 19th century literature we are overviewing the very first stages of bildungsroman, it is clear how males and females' stories were different in novels as much as they were in fairy tales. As Maroula Joannou states in her work *The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, included in Sarah Graham's book *A History of the Bildungsroman*:

> The coming-of-age journey in the classical Bildungsroman is based on the assumption of the male self as the universal self. The quest – whether geographical or the inner quest for spirituality or truth – is a quintessential aspect of human experience, not only in the Bildungsroman but also in literary forms such as the picaresque, the Arthurian legend, and epic high fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (1954), for example. If, however, one is a woman, the quest cannot be contemplated in the same way. (Graham et al. 2019: 202)

As well as fairy tales had initially more passive female characters, bildungsroman and novels had also their own way of telling a woman's story. Clearly, as it was for folktales, this different status and plotting for female characters in novels happened principally because of society's vision of women. However, differently from fairy tales, bildungsroman's and novel's characters had more space to be multifaceted and more avant-garde (both for length matters of the source material and for the nature less stereotyped of novels, contrarily to folktales). However, bildungsroman, especially when it was born, often avoided reality (like fairy tales). Although the authors lived in decades characterised by important changes and revolutions, their

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[25] The Brontë sisters, Charlotte (born April 21, 1816, and died March 31, 1855), Emily (born July 30, 1818, and died December 19, 1848) and Anne (born January 17, 1820, and died May 28, 1849), are still today well-known poets and novelists. Like many contemporary female writers, they published their poems and novels under male pseudonyms: Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell.

characters were often not aware of the real world and their stories took place in different realities which did not coincide with the author's own living.

> Just think of the historical course of the *Bildungsroman:* it originates with Goethe and Jane Austen who, as we shall see, write as if to show that the double revolution of the eighteenth century could have been avoided. It continues with Stendhal's heroes, who are born 'too late' to take part in the revolutionary-Napoleonic epic. It withers away with 1848 in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (the revolution that was not a revolution) and with the English thirties in Eliot's *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* (the 'Reforms' that did not keep their promises). It is a constant elusion of historical turning points and breaks: an elusion of tragedy. (Moretti 1987: 12)

Even though female writers were exploring the literary world and writing of characters who were subversive and more "free" than women in the real world, their epilogue was often subdued to what women were expected to do in Western society: get married and start a family. Jane Austen wrote about women who chose not to accept men's proposals, or who did not aspire to marriage at all, but at the end of the novel they get married anyway, although their goals were not to find a husband at all. Austen's works cannot be placed exactly into the bildungsroman category, however we could perceive them as precursor of said literary genre, since her characters were definitely more dynamic than the female characters that had been described in literature up until that moment.

> Many self-improving heroines can be found in nineteenth-century fiction. Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Elizabeth-Jane Henchard in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Maggie Tulliver in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) are all prime examples of a typical pattern of female aspiration and development in this period. In Victorian literature, Mary Barton in Mrs Gaskell's eponymous novel (1848) and Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) stand out as characters whose development and self-realization is at every turn influenced by the pressures and constraints of Victorian social and political realities. All of these characters also suffer the compromise of "ambivalent endings" to some degree. (McWilliams 2016: 17)

It was with the Brontë sisters that these inevitable epilogues stopped being inescapable, and it was with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* that the first bildungsroman with a relevant female protagonist was born. Ellen McWilliams writes in her 2016 book *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*: «The work of the Brontë sisters is crucial here, most eminently Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). […] *Jane Eyre* has been powerfully and aptly read as a feminist text […] it represents the apotheosis of the nineteenth-century interest in female narratives of self-realization» (McWilliams 2016: 17). For the first time with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* the heroine becomes an accomplished woman before getting married. Jane goes from being an unwanted orphan at her own family's house, to a student in an orphanage, to being a governess in a house of a rich man to then becoming a teacher in a small village and an heiress.

Just when she accomplishes herself, learns to live alone, earns for herself and finds a family, she becomes an heiress and then goes back to Mr Rochester. She marries, in the end, but it is a free choice of a free woman who would survive and be accomplished without being married to a man.

> Before Jane Austen, orphaned and expatriated from a happy childhood home, the heroines of the eighteenth-century female Bildungsroman journey through a series of social and familial relationships, meeting a variety of what Greimas would call "helpers" and "opponents," and overcoming all those features of characters and manners which each novel defined as constituting obstacles to free and equal interpersonal intercourse. (Hardin et al. 1991: 201)

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë in particular and Jane Austen's heroines therefore can be considered some of the first positive female characters in what were *ante litteram* bildungsroman in Jane Austen's case (although Austen's protagonists could not be as accomplished on their own as Brontë's ones) and the first attempts of this genre with female protagonists in Charlotte Brontë's case. From that moment on, many other heroines came to life, such as the March sisters in the *Little Women* series by Louisa May Alcott[26] and Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables*' saga by Lucy Maud Montgomery[27].

Alcott's partially autobiographical description of the character of Jo March is extremely curious. Jo, as Jane Eyre, ends up marrying at the end of *Good Wives* (the second book of the series) but leaves her hometown to see a new city, to work and earn money for herself. The March sisters' saga is slightly controversial, starting from the title of the second book. Unluckily, due to editors and publishers Alcott was asked to make her little women get married, even though she did not want to give such an epilogue to her characters.

> She loved activity, freedom, and independence. She could not cherish illusions tenderly; and she always said that she got tired of everybody, and felt sure that she should of her husband if she married. She never wished to make her heroines marry, and the love story is the part of her books for which she cared least. She yielded to the desire of the public, who will not accept life without a recognition of this great joy in it. (Cheney 1889: 91)

Alcott's characters were still written in a society that wanted women and girls to be in a certain position. However, as Seth Lerer points out in his 2008 book *Children's Literature a*

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[26] Louisa May Alcott was born November 29, 1832, and died March 6, 1888. She was an American novelist, short story writer, and poet.

[27] Lucy Maud Montgomery was born November 30, 1874, and died April 24, 1942. She was a Canadian author best known for a collection of novels, essays, short stories, and poetry.

reader's history, from Aesop to Harry Potter «[...] Each girl grows up defined by forms of literacy. Writing, drawing, reading, reciting—all come together to create an absorptive, rather than a theatrical, world for the family» (Lerer 2008: 243). The way the March sisters grow into a form of literacy was both positive and negative. It was positive because it showed that girls could have passions and could be keen on something different from domestic life. It was however negative because Alcott could not make her own characters live of their passions and had to make them become fulfilled adults mainly through marriage.

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, however, were not the only characters who, as Lerer says, grew up with certain forms of literacy. Anne Shirley, who we already mentioned, from *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, is often described with literary books in her hands and plays to show with her friends - often based on Shakespeare (Lerer 2008). Anne, like the abovementioned little women, is also a character with positive and negative traits. Like Jane Eyre, she starts her story as an unwanted orphan who is yet adopted by two siblings who live in Prince Edward's Island (Canada). She therefore upgrades her status by becoming a busy student, an active member of the community and, at the end of the first book, a teacher who wants to earn money in order to study one day in college.

> Anne enters the Cuthberts' absorptive, untheatrical, provincial house like a displaced actress. She is all exclamation points and italics, all flailing body, a pint-sized tragedian playing before an audience of rubes. And, as if to remind us that she really is imagining herself in a Shakespearean world, she asks the couple to call her "Cordelia." Part disregarded child, part Lear himself, Anne answers as a character, claiming that her own name, Anne Shirley, is too "unromantic." (Lerer 2008: 236)

However, as Lerer states, Anne is also somehow inserted in a reality who does not want to deal with her literary and romantic self. These fiction girls and future women, although being also vanguard characters, were still part of 19th century society and therefore somehow locked into the habits of those years. However, as Maria Nikolajeva states in her 2002 book *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, Anne is one of the first female characters in bildungsroman who is both "round" and dynamic. She is a multifaceted character, with flaws and imperfections who make her extremely realistic. Moreover, as already stated, she has a dynamic story that brings her to start her "adventure" as a certain version of herself and to finish it as a new, improved self, although she is not yet an adult at the end of Anne of Green Gables (she is still 16 years old).

Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Louisa May Alcott, Lucy Maud Montgomery with all their characters were pioneers of the bildungsroman, some of them even before this part of literature was established. But why are these authors and characters crucial for this research? All the case studies that will be discussed in the next three chapters, and that mainly derive from a transmediatic children's literature, would have probably never seen the light of day without the characters and the authors mentioned in these paragraphs (and with many others which came to life in the same centuries). Chapters 3, 4 and 5, therefore, aim to analyse female characters which, in certain ways, became themselves role models and focal points for feminism during more recent years and that, as Anne, Amy, Beth, Meg, Jo, Jane, Elizabeth and all the others also had, and still have, positive and negative traits as figures who are central for children's growth.

Part II – Case studies

Chapter 3 – Barbie: is the most "scandalous" doll of all time, a role model to follow?

> «How much richer would the girls' play be, Ruth wondered, if instead of flimsy paper dolls they had a real grown-up doll? "I knew that if only we could take this play pattern and three-di- mensionalize it," she told interviewers years later, "we would have something very special."»
> (Gerber 2009:6)

«Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls» (Gerwig & Baumbach 2023: 1). This is the incipit of Greta Gerwig's feature film *Barbie* (2023) which was released in July 2023 and broke numerous records. Although it is nothing but a cinematographic script, the statement written by the director and by co-writer Noah Bumbach and interpreted by actress Helen Mirren is true. The action of playing has been central for humans since the beginning of our species (and can actually be observed in other animal species too). As Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti stated in the book *Giochi e giocattoli* (Games and Toys) published in 1995:

Il gioco è un aspetto fondamentale della vita dell'uomo e di tute le sue età. Ne troviamo la testimonianza nei resti più antichi che i nostri antenati ci hanno lasciato e riusciamo a capire che, anche se non ne abbiamo nessuna prova, esso esisteva prima ancora degli albori della civiltà. (Salza Prina Ricotti 1995: 7)	Playing is a fundamental aspect of humans' life at all ages. We find evidence of it in most ancient remains that our ancestors left us and we are able to understand that, even if we have no proof of it, it existed even before the dawn of civilization.

Several educationalists and psychologists worked on the role of playing in the developing stages of human life and Lev Semënovič Vygotskij[28] is only one of them. As this Russian scholar said in his speech *Play and its role in the mental development of the child* «[…] play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading source of development in preschool years.» (Vygotskij, Veresov, Barrs 2016: 6). Playing helps developing synapses and experiences. As a matter of fact, Lev Vygotskij focused on playing in early childhood stages while explaining the use of the zone of proximal development, an abstracted place in which children can develop at best new skills and experiences. When used

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[28] Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was born November 17, 1896, and died June 11, 1934. He was a Soviet psychologist, best known for his work on psychological development in children.

positively, the new learning is arduous but not impossible and at the same time it is not too easy, in order for the child to be challenged by it.

> [...] thus, play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour. (Vygotskij, Veresov, Barrs 2016: 18)

Although this chapter is not about the act of playing itself, it is important to know a few characteristics of this important part of children's growth. A crucial part of playing that comes around the 4 years of age is *role play* (Berti & Bombi, 2018). It was observed throughout time that dolls often become a part of the action of role playing. In this chapter, therefore, we are going to examine how dolls became throughout time a crucial part of a child's growth because they were, and are still today, often used as a vector for the process of role playing and, thus, become in a certain way an outer self of the child. Although dolls were for centuries given only to girls, the aim of this chapter is to analyse what this toy meant in ancient times (in particular in Ancient Rome) and how different it is perceived nowadays, in particular after Barbie's birth (and, in consequence, how this doll changed the perception of toys for girls and women's growth throughout the 20th and 21st century).

It would be redundant to write down every single piece of games and toys that crossed space and time since the cave men existed; moreover, there are already multiple studies and pieces of literature which researched this exact topic, such as *Giochi e giocattoli nell'antichità* (Games and toys in ancient times) by Marco Fittà or the above mentioned *Giochi e Giocattoli* (Games and Toys) by Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti.

> La *tabula lusoria* bulgara, con i suoi 7000 anni di anzianità, è per il momento uno dei giochi più antichi che conosciamo. Essa batte di 2000 anni il rozzo sonaglio di coccio conservato nel Museo di Aleppo [...] o, sempre nello stesso Museo, lo schematico toro di argilla, anche lui del III millennio a.C., che si muoveva su ruote di legno fissate alle sue zampe [...] Altri giocattoli più recenti provengono sempre dalla stessa arca: sono anche loro foggiati in argilla e la loro lavorazione è rozza come quella degli oggetti precedentemente citati [...] (Salza Prina Ricotti 1995: 8-9)

> The Bulgarian *tabula lusoria*, with its 7000 years of age, is currently one of the oldest games we know. It beats by 2000 years the earthenware rattle preserved in the Museum of Aleppo [...] or, in the same Museum, the schematic clay bull, also from the 3rd millennium BC, who moved on wooden wheels which were fixed to his legs [...] Other more recent toys always come from the same "ark": they also are shaped in clay and their workmanship is as rough as the one of the previously mentioned objects [...]

However, we can point out the permanent presence of certain toys throughout time. One of the most obvious and noteworthy is without a doubt the doll. Dolls have always been a part of children's toys. There are endless examples in the oldest times, and, as Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti points out in her book *Giochi e giocattoli* (Games and toys):

E sulle rive del Nilo incontriamo le prime bambole a noi pervenute: si tratta di pupazze di pezza con il corpo piatto e sgraziato, fatto com'è da un sacchetto di stoffa imbottito con lana o stoppa da cui sporgono le sagome ritagliate in una piatta tavoletta dei visi e della parte superiore del corpo. (ibidem: 9)	And on the banks of the Nile, we meet the first dolls that have come down to us: they are rag dolls with flat and awkward bodies, made as they are from a cloth bag stuffed with wool or tow from which the shapes of the faces and bodies were cut out of a flat tablet.

The tradition of owning a doll started thousands of years ago, although the meaning of said toy changed throughout time. Even in more recent years we have been witnesses of important changes of the idea of the doll. If during the 20th century (until the 50s) and also in more recent centuries dolls were in a baby form, to teach girls the arts of childcare or housekeeping, or they were far from being somehow realistic or in three dimensions (such as paper dolls, for example), in the second half of the latest century things changed dramatically and toys which somehow seemed to prepare children for adult life have become less common (Heimburger, Donald, ed. 1983). This example of dramatic change in children's toys is not the only one that happened in history. However, describing all of them would be a topic that goes beyond the goal of this dissertation. Therefore, this chapter focalizes mainly on one doll which holds the main and most recent change in children's toys and became also an ethically and sociologically relevant change: Barbie.

To describe Barbie's importance and her role in children's growth and transmediatic literature, however, it is crucial to know at least another type of doll that existed before her. In the first part of the chapter, the main topic is going to be about a doll from Ancient Rome found in the 19th century and also described in a poem by Giovanni Pascoli[29]: Crepereia Tryphaena's doll. The role of this kind of doll was diametrically different from the most recent dolls and even more from Barbie, although there are some analogies here and there. Later in the chapter,

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[29] Giovanni Pascoli (born in San Mauro di Romagna, 31st of December 1855 and died in Bologna, 6th of April 1912) was an Italian poet and literary critic who became relevant during the late 19th century Decadent Movement in Italy.

the focus will be more about Barbie, her social and ethical role in children's growth and the relevance she had also in animation and in the latest 2023 feature film by Greta Gerwig.

3.1 Crepereia Tryphaena – a Roman *pupa*, meaning and history.

Dolls have always been an important part of human life. Even Greeks, Egyptians and Romans had dolls that were part of children's domestic life. Since then these figures have played a significant role in almost every civilization. From wooden to wax dolls to porcelain, bisque and rag dolls, this toy, which also became an item for very precise collectors, has a long history. (Goodfellow, 1993) Although Barbie is definitely the most famous doll in the contemporary world, many others came before her and were both a model and a status for young, and usually female, children. The first dolls we have track of come from Egypt, as Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti states.

Queste pupattole, con gli schematici visi rozzamente dipinti e le pesanti parrucche di grossi fili di lana nera, non sono certamente un granché, ma alla loro padroncina dovettero sembrare più belle di Hathor, la dea egizia dell'amore […] Altre bambole di pezza al di fuori dell'Egitto e di altri paesi dal clima desertico non si sono trovate, e c'era da aspettarselo, dato che soltanto in luoghi di questo genere stoffe e materiale organico si conservano bene. Però […] probabile che tutte le bambine dell'antichità giocassero con semplici ed economiche bambole del genere, cosa che del resto fanno tuttora le bimbe dei nostri tempi. (Salza Prina Ricotti 1995: 9)	These little dolls, with their crudely painted schematic faces and heavy wigs made of thick black wool threads, are certainly not much, but to their owner they must have seemed more beautiful than Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love […] No other rag dolls have been found outside Egypt and other countries with a desert climate, and this was to be expected, given that only in places of this kind fabrics and organic material such as the aforementioned could be preserved well. However […] it is probable that all the little girls of antiquity played with simple and cheap dolls of this kind, which after all the little girls of our times still do.

Dolls back then were not like the contemporary ones; they were simpler and stiffer. Often carved in wood or ivory or even created with less durable materials such as hay or wax, which would decay in a small amount of time. Marco Fittà describes the process of researching a more believable realism of these toys, usually for girls. The materials changed throughout time principally to reach said realism and maybe a more useful doll that could be less stiff and have more changeable features (such as moving arms and legs etc).

La ricerca di un sempre maggiore realismo oltre a rendere il giocattolo più fruibile, indusse gli artigiani a utilizzare anche il legno l'osso e l'avorio e a perfezionare il sistema dell'articolazione delle membra con	The search for ever greater realism, in addition to making the toy more usable, led the craftsmen to also use wood, bone and ivory and to perfect the system of

il movimento dei gomiti e delle ginocchia. (Fittà 1997: 57)	articulating the limbs with the movement of the elbows and knees.

There is, however, one particular doll which became remarkable in the late 19th century a few decades earlier than Barbie, and is known as Crepereia Tryphaena's doll. In the late 1800s, during excavations for the construction of the Palace of Justice and the Umberto I bridge crossing the Tiber river in Rome, a beautiful and well preserved sarcophagus was found. On May 10, 1889 inside the sarcophagus was found a body of a young virgin roman girl, possibly close to matrimony (given the ring she had on one of her hands). However, next to her a beautifully preserved doll was also found.

> Aside from this, the sarcophagus contained several interesting items: a beautifully carved ivory doll (22 cm. height), with articulation in the groin, elbows, knees, and shoulders; four small mirrors; two little combs; two linked together golden rings; a small golden ring holding a little key; a little ivory box; a golden ring with an inscribed cameo bearing the name "Filetus"; a golden seal ring; another golden seal ring with red jasper; a brooch with a carving in amethyst; a distaff with a little ring; earrings made of gold and pearl; a golden necklace with pendants in beryllium; and a crown of myrtle. The rich grave offerings combined with the depiction on the lateral side point to a young woman, approximately eighteen years of age, who died just before her wedding to a man called Filetus. (Laes 2019: 338-339)

The young lady found in the Roman sarcophagus was called Crepereia Tryphaena. She was probably around the 17 years of age and was going to get married possibly to a man called Filetus. This tomb was an important discovery for archeologists because it confirmed the role of dolls back in Roman Times. Dolls were gifted to young girls (the prettier and more intricate the doll the richer was the family) and they would accompany the child through her growth. The girl and the doll would part ways, before the first one would get married, during a ritual to the gods (in particular to Venus, goddess of beauty, love and matrimony). The doll would be a tribute for an initiation ceremony, somehow, of the young girl who would go from her childhood to her adulthood. Leaving her doll to the gods would be the proof of said passing.

Crepereia Tryphaena, however, was buried with not only her doll but also her possible engagement or matrimony ring. The archeologists, therefore, concluded that she probably passed right before or a little time before the ceremony and the matrimony. For this reason, the doll was placed with her, because she could not conclude her initiation to adulthood and did not get out of childhood. Giovanni Pascoli, an Italian Romantic poet, was particularly touched by

this story and, therefore, decided to write a poem about the tragic story of Crepereia Tryphaena and her doll.

> Pascoli never actually attended the excavations of May 1889. Undoubtedly, the remarkable story of the discovery and the excavation […] were well known to him. Using these as his inspiration, Pascoli composed two Latin poems in honor of the wedding of Teresa Martini, daughter of Ferdinando Martini, Italy's Minister of Public Education and Pascoli's personal friend. (ibidem: 338-339)

Giovanni Pascoli did not attend the excavations and romanticized somehow Crepereia Tryphaena's story. However, his reading is not only a wonderful piece of literature which, although it could be seen as a strange present for a wedding, would actually be appreciated, but is also an interesting point of view and perception of ancient times. Pascoli describes the doll with the sentence «Venerique pupa nota negata est» in the fifth strophe, which can be translated into «I know the puppet which has been refused to Venus» (Laes 2019).

> Pascoli clearly inserted his own interpretation. To him, the wedding was meant to be a joyful event, witnessed by two people who profoundly loved each other, and who were most likely surrounded by a loving and caring family. […] Pascoli obviously settled on a nostalgic and sentimental interpretation. […] we as readers have to acknowledge that we read the ancient sources with modern minds. (ibidem: pp 349-350)

Although we will never know Crepereia Tryphaena's real story and life, what really matters in this chapter is the presence of her doll in the sarcophagus, a testimony of not only the presence of toys in Ancient Rome but also the tradition and the use of said objects (crucial not only as a ludic presence in the child's life but also as a transition bearer). Crepereia's doll was a toy that she used, possibly, for her whole life since she was a little girl. However, it was not only a doll, it was also a version of her own persona, an outer self that "carried" her childhood memories and aura with it until it was donated as a tribute to Venus. The idea of the doll being an outer self of the child is not that far from the more recent idea of doll we had in the 20th century.

As a matter of fact, Crepereia Tryphaena's doll was not modelled after the shapes of a child, but more after an adult woman, as if it could be a projection of the child's role playing of being an adult. As stated before, role playing is crucial in a child's life and this kind of dolls were essential for the child's growth, not only because they were a projection of said child as an adult but also because they were, on a religious perspective, an integral part of the step that occurred in young women's lives when they had to go from childhood to adulthood in the Ancient Roman tradition. Nowadays we do not perceive dolls in this way anymore, although, in a less evident

way, children do stop to play with toys when they grow up. However, even if we do not tribute toys to gods anymore, dolls in particular are still important in a child's growth and perception of their "self", as we are going to analyse in the following pages.

3.2 Barbie – a doll an icon, the history.

It is impossible to talk about dolls nowadays without having at least one person thinking about Barbie dolls. The women-like toys created in the 60s by Ruth Handler are probably the most famous and long-lived "trinket" in history. Barbie (short for Barbara Millicent Roberts) is the most sold and famous doll of the world but, besides being a fortunate thought by an American woman, she was also revolutionary in her own barbie-esque way.

> Ruth had spent years convincing her designers […] that there was a market for a mass-produced adult doll. Watching her daughter, Barbara, playing with friends in the early 1950s first brought the idea to mind. Ruth listened many times at her home […] as the girls played make-believe with paper dolls. […] The way the girls held the thin cardboard women up like pup- pets and carried on conversations about adult life as they imagined it fascinated Ruth. She saw that they were seeing themselves in the role that they imagined for the doll. They were also mimicking adult conversation. (Gerber 2009: pp 5-6)

As Robin Gerber states in her 2009 book *Barbie and Ruth*, Ruth Handler used to observe her child playing and thought that it could be a good idea to give young girls a doll that was in the shape of an adult and could be used during what she witnessed being certain role-playing conversations. Barbie was not the only doll who had the concept of being fashionable or with clothes that could be changed depending on the "occasion" or the setting of the playtime. We already saw that also in ancient times certain dolls started having their own wardrobes and jewelry[30]; therefore, the idea of having a doll who could change with fashion was not new. It was, however, an unfamiliar idea to make her look like an adult.

> There were fashion or glamour dolls at the time: Dollikin, Little Miss Ginger, Sindy, Miss Revlon, and others, and although some were labeled "teenaged," they looked like baby dolls with makeup and styled hair. Although they had changeable adult out fits, their bodies were childlike or pubescent and varied in size. (ibidem: pp 6-7)

Dolls that were more child-like were not always common, again, as stated above, in ancient times dolls were not really shaped on children figures but more on adult figures. However, as

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[30] Cf. chapter 3.1

we already know[31], the idea and presence of childhood as an important time in a human being's life is a recent tradition (which was born between the 18th and the 19th century); therefore, to have dolls that looked like children before said time would have been a difficult find. However, during the Modern and the Contemporary eras, it became more and more common for dolls to be shaped as infants or toddlers, no matter, as stated by Gerber, how glamorous or fashionable they could or had to be.

Barbie was, for the first time in hundreds of years, an adult doll who could dress as she liked and could be whatever she wanted to be. She had breasts, as adult women had, and could act like the adults who surrounded little girls were acting while being more believable that other dolls that were available in the 50s. «The fashion story began in 1959 with the introduction of the Barbie doll in the famous black and white swimsuit! In the first year, 22 costumes were available for the fashion model. These fashions were predominately glamorous with a few styles for the casual times» (Sink Eames 1990: 7).

Noticeably, the idea of Barbie being "anything" (Gerber, 2009) became popular with time and as a selling product, this toy too became a matter of money, at a certain point. However, economy and marketing aside, it is evident that the creation of this doll changed the market, the idea of toys that had been produced until that moment and, therefore, the idea of female childhood that was considered until 1959. Barbie was a statement. The 50s had been the peak moment for women to be seen as housewives and barely something more. To have a doll, shaped like an adult who could dress as she liked, who could be as fashionable as Hollywood stars and not necessarily enclosed in a household was a pivotal moment, turning this doll almost in a super heroine who arrived to save the day.

However, Barbie did become controversial with time. If her creation was a groundbreaking moment, with decades passing it was necessary to point out a few issues that came with the extremely thin, blonde and beautiful Barbie. As Joanne Hollows would point out in her work *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* published in 2000 «It is often argued that second wave feminism has created an opposition between 'bad' feminine identities and 'good' feminist identities» (Hollows 2000: 9). Whether it was the second wave feminism or not, the fact that

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[31] Cf. chapter 1.1

Barbie was not really inclusive and, possibly, a negative example for young girls was definitely pointed out. As Jacqueline Urla and Alan Swedlund state in their article *The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture*, however:

> It is not our intention to settle the debate over whether Barbie is a good or bad role model for little girls or whether her unrealistic body wrecks havoc on girls' self-esteem. Though that issue surrounds Barbie like a dark cloud, such debates have too often been based on literal-minded, decontextualized readings of popular culture. We want to suggest that Barbie dolls, in fact, offer a much more complex and contradictory set of possible meanings that take shape and mutate in a period marked by the growth of consumer society, intense debate over gender and racial relations, and changing notions of the body. (Urla & Swedlund 1995: 278)

It is also evident that the 2023 world is quite different from 1995 Urla and Swedlund's world. Nowadays the examples and models that children are witnesses of do not unfortunately come only from toys. However, Barbie did, somehow, create an impossible standard to achieve for little girls. Although Barbie's creator (A/N Ruth Handler) «[…] had never understood or agreed with the criticism of Barbie as somehow damaging to girls' image of themselves.» (Gerber 2009: 250), it is crucial to consider this aspect of the doll's history. Barbie was born as a toy that gave young girls the possibility to play with dolls which were not child-like and that did not prepare them somehow to motherhood or to be housewives, as Gary Cross states in his book *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* while speaking of the A. C. Gilbert's heritage[32]: «The old kitchen play sets, dollhouses, and baby dolls that were to teach girls the arts of housekeeping and childcare are also less in evidence today. Toys that seem to prepare children for adult life have become harder to and» (Cross 1999: 4).

However, Barbie became itself a toy that could potentially marginalize children, or more specifically, it became with time an image, an icon and, therefore, a standard that a human can hardly ever reach. Standards for female bodies changed dramatically throughout time but they became drastic in the 20th century with Barbie being, possibly, one of the reasons having a slender and thin body is something to be more hopeful for than having a different shape or size. «Those of us who have grown up with Barbie no doubt felt marginalised by the doll's body type that carries the message that beauty is about being blond, tall and thin» (Gibson, Bridges

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[32] The A. C. Gilbert Heritage Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public charitable organization incorporated in the State of Ohio. The Society preserves, promotes, and interprets the legacy of educational toys produced and sold by the A. C. Gilbert Company of New Haven, Connecticut, for the inspiration and benefit of students, educators, and collectors across the United States and around the world. (source: https://www.acghs.org/)

& Wulff 2023: 1) state these aforementioned gender studies scholars. It is no news that women are judged by their looks in particular and we could say that Mary Rogers already wrote something about this precise topic in her book *Barbie Culture* (1999):

> It is easy to forget how rarely women get much attention, let alone center stage, for anything other than how they look and how much (hetero)sex appeal they have. Barbie may be an astronaut or a physician, a skier or a golfer, a traveler or a rock n-roller, but she gets little attention on those grounds. What really counts is how Barbie looks. (Rogers 1999: 19)

But the consequent question which is probably still unsolved is: is it something that comes naturally from children while playing with Barbie dolls or is it a production of the society's vision of women. As Rogers says (year), we are aware of the fact that Barbie is not real, that it does not set realistic standards. However, we still perceive the doll as the center of the problem instead of the standards that society itself sets. Is Barbie the product of said standard or are the standards the products of a certain mentality of society which are based also on Barbie's dolls? The answer is not univocal, but as Jacqueline Urla and Alan Swedlund already wrote in 1995:

> […] neither children nor adult consumers of popular culture are simply passive victims of dominant ideology. It is sensible to assume that the children who play with Barbie are themselves creative users, who respond variously to the messages about femininity encoded in her fashions and appearance. (Urla & Swedlund 1995: 302)

We could argue that Barbie has always been an ideology, an unreachable dream or an impossible standard but, using Robin Gerber's words, «One thing Barbie was not, unlike Ruth (A/N: Ruth Handler, creator of Barbie), was a wife and mother. While Mattel marketed a number of wedding-themed Barbie and Ken outfits and accessories, Barbie's marital state was always inconclusive» (Gerber 2009: 250). Barbie was not created to be a standard; it was made for young girls to see other perspectives beside motherhood or the housewife's life as their possible futures (Gerber 2009). If Barbie became an astronaut, maybe also the girl playing with said doll could think of becoming one. And, although it might seem improbable for these kinds of topics to be relevant in a child's growth and mentality, gender studies proved that the exposition to such information from an early age can change children's perspective (as described in Appendix IV).

Why, therefore, is it relevant to talk about this doll in this thesis? «The "Barbie" franchise is not just the story of a doll; it is a story of a style and culture icon that has had a profound impact on millions of girls and women worldwide» (Havrylenko 2023: 1). Although

Havrylenko talks about the 2023 film in particular (A/N which we are going to discuss in the next section of the chapter), the statement is without a doubt realistic. As we already discussed, Barbie is the most famous doll of the world, always recognizable and well-known. It's still Mary Rogers who sums up in a sentence what Barbie is and has always been for generations of young girls. «Under such circumstances we may "know" Barbie and other fantastic creations are not "real," but in our gut they may feel real enough to serve as touchstones or role models, as fuel for our dreams and hopes, as emblems of who we want to be or want, at least, to try to be» (Rogers 1999: 19).

Barbie is the epitome of a dream, whether said dream is going to be a positive aim and a good role model to follow for children is up to adults and to the society, the standards, and the expectations we create for children. Female bodies' standards have changed thoroughly in history, and it is of no surprise that since globalization and capitalism started standards have been reversed and re-reversed so many times. Toys are part of children's lives and Barbie is, and will continue to be, part of our routine. Moreover, Mattel has not only created a doll, with her friends, boyfriend and set of gadgets, but an entire franchise, as Havrylenko stated above, with movies and tv series, which we are going to speak about in the next section of the chapter.

3.2.1 Barbie, an icon not only as a toy. Barbie is… a movie protagonist.

Barbie is an icon, in its positive and negative ways, as we have already stated. However, Barbie is not only a toy; althrough the years Mattel produced animated films and TV series with their most famous doll as a protagonist, the target was evidently a children audience specifically composed by young girls. The animation of the first films was not groundbreaking and not comparable to what cinematographic animation was already back then in 2001, thanks to studios such as Disney, Dreamworks and Blue Sky (nevertheless, Barbie films were produced not to be shown in cinemas but as home videos). However, this production of animated movies started in 2001 and has not stopped since with its highs and lows about the quality of animation and of synopsis. What is interesting about these products is how Mattel kept Barbie's philosophy also in a completely different environment which, back in 2001, had not a lot to do with toys and could have been a not really safe option of investment.

The first feature film produced was *Barbie in the Nutcracker* (2001), loosely based on *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by E. T. A. Hoffmann[33] and *The Nutcracker* ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky[34]. This pivot movie has been followed by 41 other animated movies (with the last one being produced in 2023) one live action and an already scheduled 44th product to be aired in 2024. Initially, the majority of Barbie's feature length films were based off fairy tales, famous ballets or books (*The Nutcracker, The Swan Lake, Rapunzel or The Princess and the Pauper* are just a few examples). However, the latest movies are often originals and not based on an already existent synopsis.

> Following the successful release of the animated film "Barbie in the Nutcracker" in 2001, the Barbie franchise in cinema embarked on a robust development trajectory. Mattel and Barbie Entertainment capitalized on the brand's popularity and continued to create new films that resonated with children and families. (Havrylenko 2023: 2)

The peculiarity of Barbie's animated films is the protagonist herself. Mattel team decided to create animated films which starred Barbie as an actress in a "produced film". As if, somehow, in a fictitious Barbie world Barbara herself was a living creature who decided to be an actress and was, therefore, chosen as protagonist of numerous feature length films. Thus, after the ending of the majority of these 42 feature length animated films, Barbie is seen with her co-stars in a few scenes which could be described as "bloopers" or "outtakes", in a few words, as if behind the scenes the animated characters actually acted and made some mistakes during the "filming" of the movie.

As a confirmation of what was stated above, Appendix III shows the full list of all Barbie's animated movies' titles. Linguistically speaking, it is extremely clear the presence of Barbie in the films as an actress. Many films are named "Barbie as…" or "Barbie in…" and, as seen in Graphic I, the famous doll is herself in 41% of the films she stars in, while for the other 59% of movies she tells the story as herself (but has another name during the narration, as in, for example, *Barbie in the Nutcracker* where she is the character Clara) or she is just another

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[33] Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann was born January 24, 1776, in Prussia and died June 25, 1822 in Berlin. Hoffmann was a German Romantic author of fantasy and Gothic horror, a music critic and an artist.
[34] Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Пётр Ильи́ч Чайко́вский) was born in Kamsko-Votkinsk May 7, 1840 and died in Saint Petersburg November 6, 1893. He was a Russian composer of the romantic period, most known for his music for the ballets The Swan Lake, The Nutcracker and The Sleeping Beauty. He is also famous in the classical music world for his concerts for violin and piano.

character who lives the story she is in (and is, therefore, never named Barbie – besides in the aforementioned outtakes/bloopers).

As already stated in chapter 3.2 using Robin Gerber's words, Barbie can be anything and anyone she wants to. She is a princess, a pauper, a young girl in the Victorian age, a mermaid, and a fairy. It does not matter where or when the film is set, Barbie will still be recognizable by the audience, but she will live any adventure she wants. However, in the latest years most of Barbie's animated films had the doll portraying herself or living an adventure as herself and not anymore as a character in a story, which became even more evident in the latest and most famous film about Barbie, released in August 2023, starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling and directed by Greta Gerwig.

Barbie (2023) is a live action film which sees the protagonist having an existential crisis as life in Barbie's matriarchal world is not as dreamy as it should be. Barbie, therefore, goes on a journey in the real world to find out who she really is and if the legacy she has is actually as positive as everybody in Barbie World believes (Gerwig & Baumbach, 2023). The movie created not only high expectations in the audience, but also its production invested in an enormous advertisement for it to become one of the most important events of the year. We could easily say that during the 2023 summer the world turned pink. This movie is a social and ethical story which goes into self-criticism and becomes somehow also metatheatrical. The film tried to have a target audience as large as possible, meaning that the film tried to be comprehensible and enjoyable for most of the audience. For this reason, to reach not only children but mainly adults, a critic towards itself was also written, besides being a product full of nostalgia, as Vladyslava Havrylenko states.

> To effectively engage this adult demographic, the marketing team embarked on a journey of nostalgia-driven marketing. They tapped into the sentiments of those who had fond memories of playing with Barbie dolls, watching Barbie cartoons, and immersing themselves in the imaginative world of Barbie games during their formative years. By evoking these cherished memories, the team aimed to rekindle the enthusiasm of adult fans, offering them a chance to relive the magic of Barbie on the big screen. (ibidem: 2)

The film did not meet everybody's expectations or approvement. Some pedagogists, sociologists and gender-studies scholars have not been positively captured by the 2023 film by Greta Gerwig, with Suzie Gibson, Donna Bridges and Elizabeth Wulff, being some of them. In their article *Is the Barbie movie a feminist triumph or flop? Three gender studies academics*

have their say these three scholars state that «Regardless of the claims for hyper-femininity and a feminist bimbo classic, Barbie reminds us, at best, that the real danger is patriarchy. Yet, the real disappointment is there's not a feminist solution in sight» (Gibson et al. 2023). Although it is true that Barbie 2023 live action does not give solutions to the audience, the point is exactly there. There is no solution to Barbie World's matriarchy because there is no solution in Real World's patriarchy, and it is our duty to find this solution.

Regarding our topic, however, Barbie (2023) is more inclusive and an improved role model for young children. Barbie not only accepts an ordinary life (and tranforms throughout the film into a more realistic persona, while at the beginning she is fully into her stereotypical Barbie self) but is surrounded by other "barbies" with different bodies and goals in life. It is of no doubt that this film in particular is very well studied in every detail in order to become a sensational product loved and accepted by most people, while, therefore, making a clever marketing move. However, as Havrylenko states:

> […] "Barbie" film exemplifies the synergy between nostalgia and innovation in marketing. By drawing upon the deep well of nostalgia that adults have for the brand while simultaneously captivating the imaginations of younger generations, the film managed to create a multi-generational fanbase. This unique blend of marketing tactics demonstrated that the resonance of a cherished brand like Barbie can extend across time, generations, and mediums. (Havrylenko 2023: 4)

Barbie is not only a phenomenal marketing move, but it has also pedagogically relevant thoughts behind it. Ruth Handler thought about making a doll which would make her daughter and her friends role plays more interesting. Instead of giving them paper dolls she created a 3D doll which did not look like a baby but was a grown adult which could inspire them. Barbie was not only more maneuverable, but also a reassurance that girls did not need to be only mothers or wives, once they had grown.

3.3. Concluding remarks.

The idea of Barbie's statement (that she can be anything) to be applied to a movie franchise is the maximum extension of role modelling for this product. It is with no doubts that Barbie, with her standards, brought also insecurities into the picture. There are numerous scholars who researched the topic, such as Gibson, Bridges and Wulff (2023), who pointed out that women can get marginalized by Barbie's body type. It is true that any standard about bodies is nothing

more than a standard, an ideology that we as humans and adults create and that children interiorize with time.

Studies about body image and ideals are extremely arduous and this thesis does not want to go too much into the topic. Although when speaking about role models and examples for children it is inevitable to reach certain fields. Moreover, this thesis is specifically about female characters and female experiences in childhood, but it is important to point out that every human being can experience problematics with body image and body esteem. As Hope Boyd stated in her 2017 article *Thin and sexy vs. muscular and dominant: Prevalence of gendered body ideals in popular dolls and action figures*:

> These gendered body ideals are problematic when they affect children's own body esteem. According to sociocultural models of body dissatisfaction, characters with unrealistic body ideals can affect body dissatisfaction in children when children internalize these body ideals and compare their body to these depictions. […] In children, girls have been found to identify with either male or female characters, but boys tend to identify with only male characters (Hoffner, 1996). It is unfortunate that girls have the choice between more and less objectified dolls, while boys who play with action figures are unlikely to encounter toys that do not have sexual actor features. (Boyd 2017: 94-95)

Again, to deal with such topic would mean to extend the thesis to fields that not only are too far from the main issue but way too complicated to be completed only in one part of a chapter. We can notice, however, that scholars have focused on the matter and, as Helga Dittmar and her colleagues have pointed out: «It seems likely that there is a sensitive phase when girls use Barbie dolls as aspirational role models, which may end around age 7 to age 8 because girls have internalized the thin beauty ideal by then, and their desire to be thinner is more a reflection of that internalized standard than a direct response to environmental stimuli.» (Dittmar et al. 2006: 290).

The aim of the chapter was to discuss the different use of dolls, how the use of these toys changed through time and how, even with the ethical issues concerning said famous toy, Barbie had several positive characteristics in its creation. The idea that women can be whatever they want, no matter how feminine they are, and no matter what society tells them to be, in particular when regarding the topic of male/female gaze and strong female characters (which we are going to analyse in Chapter 4), is a positive vision. Flawed, obviously, but also helpful and ideal, for children, in a certain way.

Chapter 4 – The idea of a "strong" woman: prototype or stereotype? How female characters are represented in Disney animation.

> «Anna's maturity in this film can be tracked by her clothing. At the beginning of the film, she wears an ivory dress to represent her youthful, playful personality. But her travel outfit is mostly black to show that she is strong and knows when to be serious.
> - Griselda Sastrawinata-Lemay, visual development artist»
> (Julius 2019: 31)

In the previous chapters I have introduced the presence of female characters in media for children, from fairy tales to bildungsroman to toys. This chapter will focus on animation since, nowadays, it is one of the main ways children have an impact with transmediatic children's literature.

Female representation in films has always been problematic, as Dr. Martha Lauzen[35] says in her annual reports. She deals with films in general, but the problem is projected into animation too. Charles Solomon inserted in the introduction of his book *The Man Who Leapt Through Film* (2022), a Don Hahn speech, which starts with a precise description of animation: «Animation is a complicated web of technology, artistry, and storytelling that many have tried, and few have mastered. It's an elaborate illusion made from pencils, paint, and pixels that, at its best, allows us to escape reality» (Solomon 2022: 8). Animation as a film genre started existing not long after cinema was born. At the beginning of the 20th century silent animation started to be created and a few years later, Walt Disney[36] founded his company and started what is, still today, a strong legacy.

Although history of animation is certainly an interesting topic which would need more than a single chapter to be described, this chapter will focus on female representation in Western animation (with its focus on Disney animation). Asian and Eastern animation is purposely left out for a few reasons. First, animation in the Asian world has always been known as a cinematic and silver screen genre, not as a children product. For instance, in Japanese culture, as described

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[35] Since 2002, *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World has* tracked the representation of female characters in the top 100 grossing films (international films and re-issues omitted). (Lauzen 2023: 2)
[36] Walter Elias Disney (born December 5, 1901, and died December 15, 1966) was an American animator, film producer, and entrepreneur.

in chapter 1, manga and anime can be for adults as well as for children. Secondly, analysing thoroughly Eastern animation would mean to have a completely different thesis and research, since the topics and the ethical issues in female representation in Asia is different for social and cultural reasons from the Western world ones, as stated earlier.

It is also important, however, to deal with the misconception that the Western world has, still today, about animation. Since this movie and television genre started mainly with silence animation and Walt Disney's works between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it became a straightforward consequence to believe that this kind of product must be for children only. However, it is a far spread misconception. Although there are distinct children's products in animation which are made specifically for them (all those products such as *Peppa Pig* or *Baby Shark*, which are often created with pedagogically or educationally relevant purposes), there are many others which are thought for a larger audience. For instance, animation has also been used in scientific research with people with autism (Edey et al. 2016) or with elderly people (Marsh et al. 2011). Therefore, animation is often thought as a childish genre of cinema and television, but the truth is that there could be no greater misconception about it. However, since animation is one of the first television and cinematographic experience children have and since Disney films are a vast and good sample to research, this case study is going to focus on this smaller side of animation.

Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, animation is a big part of transmediatic children's literature and, since we already spoke in chapter 2 and 3 about female representation in fairy tales, novels and toys, it is essential to deepen our knowledge about women and girls in animation, mostly because this genre is without a doubt more iconographic and visual than literary stories. As Pat Heine points out in her 1999 article *Talking about Books: Strong Female Characters in Recent Children's Literature* with her colleagues Inkster, Kazemek, Williams, Raschke and Stevens:

> Girls often have to "battle messages that tell them they are second best, or victims, or human beings measured by the beauty of their bodies and the pliability of their minds" (Bauermeister & Smith, 1997, p. viii). Sadker and Sadker (1994) have documented the negative effect that gender stereotypes have on the self-esteem and self-worth of girls. Our experience told us that positive images of girls can be found in children's literature […] (Heine et al. 1999: 427)

As mentioned in chapter 2, male characters were more present as protagonists in fairy tales and novels and that female characters obtained the role of protagonists with time. The same

phenomena happened in cinema and, in certain ways, also in animation. Female characters, especially in live action movies, had to wait a lot of time to become relevant protagonists. Not only as characters, but also in posters, as Melinda Aley states in her 2020 article written with Lindsay Hahn *The Powerful Male Hero: A Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Posters for Children's Animated Movies*:

> When examining the frequency of main characters' genders, females were underrepresented in movie posters compared to males. This finding is consistent with previous research which has found male characters to be more prevalent in media targeted at children (Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Riffe et al. 1989; Smith 1994). Our supplemental analyses also suggest that this representation does not vary over time. (Aley, Hahn 2020: 8)

Not only Aley and Hahn noticed that female characters have been underrepresented in movie posters for years (and often are nowadays too), but they also showed in their research how in said billboards there are often scenes in which female protagonists are saved by their male co-protagonists (and therefore are submitted to what Heine and her collegues stated about female characters being relegated to the victim role or to being the second best). As in fairy tales and novels, therefore, female characters have not always been positively represented (cinematography and animation are not exceptions). In this chapter, however, we are going to describe briefly about female characters evolution (or dis-evolution) into "strong female characters" in cinematography and, in the end, analyse Walt Disney Animation Studios feature films' female protagonists. Western animation is extremely vast, but Disney movies do have a wide enough range to be considered a valid and exhaustive sample.

4.1 To be or not to be strong? A called reaction, now way too stereotyped, in contemporary screenplays.

Female representation in the movie industry and in particular in animation is no stranger to controversy. As already said, for decades female characters were often portrayed as side characters or flat characters next to men. What therefore started happening in the latest years is a complete and opposite reaction to the "segregation" female characters were in. While perfectly following Newton's third physics law ("For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."), female characters passed from being flat and submissive to being strong and able to do everything flawlessly all together. However, years and many strong female characters later, the reaction to hearing yet again another character described with this formula is more annoying than ever or, as Carina Chocano wrote in her 2011 New York Times' article

Tough, Cold, Terse, Taciturn and Prone to Not Saying Goodbye When They Hang Up the Phone: «Every time I hear someone use the term "strong female character," I want to punch them» (Chocano 2011: 1).

What went wrong? What happens between the frustration of seeing only flat and static characters to the creation of new and strong characters who are proactive, dynamic and round, as Maria Nikolajeva would describe them? Luoying Yang, Xu Zhou, and Luo Jiebo tried to answer to these questions in their 2020 research *Measuring Female Representation and Impact in Films over Time*. In order to do that, they proposed the female cast ratio as a new measure to investigate the improvement of female representation and its relationship with a movie's success. As they explained, it is the filmmakers' interest to understand the needs of the audience, in order to show viewers what surveys say they want to watch.

> In more recent times, women have made inroads into various fields and films have started to respond to female viewers with strong and well-rounded female characters. There are many studies and projects devoted to studying evolving feminism in films, centering on both the up-stream effects, in which content is structured through the actions of major filmmakers in gendered organizations who presume the public's preferences, as well as the downstream effects, where audiences respond to content and attitudes are formed and reinforced. (Yang et al. 2020: 2)

Unfortunately, this dynamic imploded, and strong female characters started becoming a stereotype themselves. As Chocano states in her article, what is now known as the strong female character had originally the best intentions, it was meant to be something different. Nowadays, however, it is so exploited that it is nothing more than a cinematic cliché which is becoming even more annoying and predictable than those flat and submissive characters it was trying to overcome.

> "Strong female character" is one of those shorthand memes that has leached into the cultural groundwater and spawned all kinds of cinematic clichés: alpha professionals whose laserlike focus on career advancement has turned them into grim, celibate automatons; robotic, lone-wolf, ascetic action heroines whose monomaniacal devotion to their crime-fighting makes them lean and cranky and very impatient; murderous 20-something comic-book salesgirls who dream of one day sidekicking for a superhero; avenging brides; poker-faced assassins; and gloomy ninjas with commitment issues. (Chocano 2011: 1)

As a matter of fact, having these somehow clichéd but still new characters is a breath of fresh air since we lived for centuries with very weak proposals from literature and other media.

But did we? Elena Gianini Belotti[37] definitely thinks that and writes it quite clearly in her 1973 book *Dalla parte delle bambine* (On young girls' side). She is extremely critical on fairy tales who, as she states, propose extremely weak and negative female examples to young girls.

Le vecchie favole propongono donne miti, passive, inespresse, unicamente occupate della propria bellezza, decisamente inetti e incapaci. Di contro le figure maschili sono forti, coraggiose, leali, intelligenti. Oggi le favole non si raccontano quasi più ai bambini, che le hanno sostituite con la televisione e le storie inventate per loro, ma alcune tra le più note sono sopravvissute e tutti le conoscono. (Gianini Belotti 2023: 120)	The old fairy tales propose meek, passive, unexpressed women, solely occupied with their own beauty, decidedly inept and incapable. On the other hand, male figures are strong, courageous, loyal, intelligent. Today fairy tales are almost no longer told to children, who have replaced them with television and stories invented for them, but some of the best known have survived and everyone knows them.

As already discussed in chapter 2, female characters from fairy tales did tend to be mainly passive and static in their stories, possibly because of women's view that society had back in the 17th and 18th century (when fairy tales started being written into collections). However, as we have seen, it was not only the case and already in the 18th century a revolution started with characters such as the *Beauty and the Beast'* protagonist and, in the 19th century, with many bildungsroman's main female leads.

There are still examples which can be misleading and possibly wrong for young children, but which is the best way to face them? There are two ways of reacting to these stories and characters, one of these is similar to what is now called "cancel culture", therefore, to just forget them and never deal with them at all. The second way would be to contextualize them and to shepherd children through these stories that could lead them to have wrong beliefs and ideas. As it often happens, dialogue, education and pedagogy would be the right answers. This is at least what postfeminism thinks nowadays and what this whole discussion about strength and representation is about. Postfeminism is how contemporary feminism is defined, although, as Rosalind Gill explains in her 2017 article *The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on*:

> One of the most striking trends of the last decade has been the uptake of the notion of postfeminism as a critical term. […] Within media and cultural studies, it is notable that discussions have moved far beyond what seemed to be almost a 'canon' of postfeminist texts […] A number of writers point

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[37] Elena Gianini Belotti (born December 2, 1929, and died December 24, 2022) was an Italian writer, teacher, and activist.

to the extraordinary durability and adaptability of the term and its capacity to speak to a wide range of pressing contemporary issues […] the term has also been refined and developed over the last decade, with suggestions that it is important to make distinctions between different variants of postfeminism. […] They suggest adding an interrogative to the word – post?feminism – to indicate that 'feminist engagement is multiple and shifting and that the breadth of issues involved in feminist identification is much more complex today' […]. (Gill 2017: 610)

Postfeminism, gender studies, pedagogy, education, all convey together to study and understand what is best for children in nowadays society. What should we look forward to see in role models and in particular in female characters who are available in transmediatic children's literature? The answer that has been presented in the last few years is to have strong female leads who could inspire girls and women with their strength. But is it a powerful response to old stereotypes? Or is it a snake that bites its own tail? Loredana Lipperini is quite sure of this issue and of the birth of stronger and more powerful female characters in her 2007 book *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine* (Still on young girl's side).

Se, insomma, la restituzione di potenza avviene percorrendo soprattutto la via sovrannaturale, le nuove eroine dell'immaginario non fanno che riproporre un ruolo ben noto. In apparenza allettante, è vero: ma si dia uno sguardo alla schiera maschile degli eroi elencati - per difetto - da Simone de Beauvoir: "Perseo, Ercole, Davide, Achille, Lancillotto… quanti uomini per una Giovanna d'arco; e dietro di lei si profila la grande figura maschile di San Michele Arcangelo". Inoltre, fra le donne manca, ineluttabilmente, un Ulisse. Se non sono votate alla castità, le magiche eroine sognano l'amore. Ancor prima della salvezza dell'universo. (Lipperini 2010: 189)

In short, if the restitution of power occurs mainly along the supernatural path, the new heroines of fiction do nothing but re-propose a well-known role. Apparently tempting, it's true: but take a look at the male array of heroes listed - by default - by Simone de Beauvoir: "Perseus, Hercules, David, Achilles, Lancelot... how many men for a Joan of Arc; and behind her looms the large male figure of Saint Michael the Archangel". Furthermore, among the women there is inevitably missing a Ulysses. If they are not devoted to chastity, the magical heroines dream of love. Even before saving the universe.

According to Lippeini there are certainly new more powerful female characters available to children, but the effort is not enough, since also powerful women in literature or other media are often accompanied by the strong presence of a cumbersome male character. Lipperini is not the only scholar who stated her skepticism on this topic, although she mainly spoke of literary examples. Many scholars started questioning whether the birth of this new prototype of a strong female character has actually been an improvement or not, as Hanna Flint underlines in her 2023 book *Strong Female character*.

Yet the term Strong Female Character[TM] (SFC) has earned a controversial reputation nowadays because its ubiquity encompasses any female character with rich motivations, flaws, quirks and emotional depth. […] This type of SFC has evolved over the years with film-makers responding to

the gender politics of the time, but would we ever use the phrase 'Strong *Male* Character'? It's already assumed they will be strong: superpowers or not. Unless you're Steve Coogan in *The Parole Officer* who needs to eat emergency bags of crisps to combat his hypoglycaemia. Of the top grossing films of 2019, female protagonists were more common in horror, dramas and comedies, according to Women and Hollywood, while action was the least common for women to work in [...] (Flint 2022: 242-245)

What has probably been the greatest impasse in this whole situation is the use of the word "strong", and therefore of the very definition of the female characters which were created in the last few decades. The real problem is that strength is usually linked to bodies, to physical strength and to characteristics that, stereotypically are viewed as more masculine. This would not be a problem, a person can be more masculine or more feminine regardless of their gender, however, it becomes a problem when this strength becomes a stereotype itself. In the latest decades, female characters have become stronger but also flawless, as if being strong would mean to not have any flaws at all. Not only, but since they have to be flawless, they often become emotionless or scared of their own emotions, as Chocano states.

Certainly, this representation also brought positive outcomes. As Hanna Flint says in her 2022 book *Strong female characters*: «Seeing strong women claim their space, take on the proverbial man and live to tell the tale has been a reassuring, albeit inconsistent, image to witness. [...] this authoritative positioning of women might just offer the average female cinemagoer the same sort of solace. Or at the very least, provide inspiration for younger generations» (Flint 2022: 253). However, it would be definitely better to have characters who are strong in their weaknesses, in their flaws and still manage to be interesting without the need to be the now stereotyped strong female character.

> She could be physically weak but still courageous, like *Encanto*'s Mirabel or *Heathers*' Veronica. Her strength of character can be shown through success as well as failure like Turquoise in *Miss Juneteenth*. 'The best Strong Female Characters,' writes Tasha Robinson, 'are the physically and emotionally weak ones. Characters who have a lot to overcome to become heroes are the bravest and most inspirational.' We deserve more than stock action babes, gender-swapped movies and rebooted franchises that don't do enough to establish female leads outside of the male shadows [...] (Flint 2022: 253)

The real issue is to be strong, physically, mentally in a period of post feminism. There is nothing such as a strong woman. There are women. That are all different and with different characteristics. However, it is still hard to have enough female representation; it is of no surprise, therefore, that these characters are still stereotypically created. In the 2010 research

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The effect of cartoon movies on children's gender development, Armağan Gökçearslan emphasised the presence of male and female characters in cartoon movies.

> When cartoon movies are examined, it is seen that the number of male characters are more than females. According to a research report in 1981, Barcus (1983) "realized that 75% of characters in children's TV shows are male while 21% are female". Women's representation at low status especially reveals itself in the job they do. Many female characters in cartoon movies are reflected either as sexual objects or as being unemployed. Very few of them have jobs and these are generally the ones carried out within house, Very few of them have jobs and these are generally the ones carried out within house and insignificant. Female characters are rather reflected as house wives, mothers, girl friends, grandmothers, aunts, evil man's daughter, maids, nannies, nurses, teachers, secretaries, waitresses, singers, movie stars, TV reporters, circus member and member and wizard. (Gökçearslan 2010: 5204)

Regardless of strong characters or not, what is important (and is also going to be talked about in the last case study, in chapter 5) is to have a solid representation which, hopefully, could be empowering and positive for younger generations. Many studies, however, demonstrated that it is not yet the case. This chapter started by quoting Marta Lauzen's research and polls about female representation in cinema. Although she has worked on this representation for 20 years now, and the presence of female characters in movies has been improved , still today the female representation is incredibly lower than the male one. Moreover, as already mentioned, female characters started being prototyped into a new stereotyped and the message that is spreading around seems to suggest that in order to be "strong" women must do risky things and use weapons, as if strength could only be shown with these characteristics. But as Sarah Shehatta underlines in her 2020 article *Breaking Stereotypes: A Multimodal Analysis of the Representation of the Female Lead in the Animation Movie Brave*:

> Real feminist empowerment is not solely suggested through violent and risky actions that might seem masculine, but joint masculine-feminine acts that break gender stereotypes of both femininity and masculinity. [...] Thus, girls and women can be brave to climb mountains, be competitive to defeat male rivals, be skilled in using weapons to fight and rescue others (Shehatta 2020: 187).

This ambiguity that has been created with what Flint defines as SFC, gives the impression that there is no other way for female characters to be strong if not by acquiring masculine characteristics. This tendency has also begun to be used in Walt Disney's animated films, where the majority of female characters, at least until 2021 productions, had to wear at least a pair of trousers through their story: «Disney female characters have always been strong and proactive despite the nature of their clothes» (Galizia 2022: 78). However, lately, to show this strength characters are often masculinized, and that is the main reason why SFC are so disliked nowadays.

As Hanna Flint states in her book while talking about the character of Monica in *Love &*
Basketball[38]: «She was a strong female character in the best sense; a woman who wants love
and whose vulnerability is just as powerful a part of who she is as her ambition to become a
professional basketball player» (Flint 2022: 68), and this is possibly the best outcome that could
come from female representation in media. However, since the main topic of the chapter and
of the thesis is female representation for children, the last part of the chapter will focus mainly
on female representation in Disney animation.

4.2 Walt Disney's Studios and its female characters: are they really a dream come true?

As Disney animation is extremely vast, it is hard to put together all the production that the
Animation Studios created through the years, principally because of all the other studios that
were added to the original company. Pixar, 20th century fox, Blue Sky, all these animation
studios and production companies are today part of Disney. However, we can narrow the
discourse to Walt Disney Animation Studios films, which are now 62 with the release of *Wish*
at the end of 2023 (Appendix V), since those are the most representative films of the studio. As
stated in the 2022 article *A trousers matter: are Disney's female characters clothes of the latest
animated and live action films empowering or a weak façade?* Walt Disney Animation Studios
films are principally with male protagonists, although the characters we remember the most are
princesses.

> Although the original number of films with male protagonists and with female protagonists is quite
> different (out of the 60 Walt Disney Animation Studios films, only 17 have female protagonists
> while 32, more than half of the films, have male protagonists) the percentage of presence of the
> protagonist's opposite gender is higher in films with female protagonists […] For instance, the film
> *Tangled* has Rapunzel as a protagonist, a female character, but Flynn Rider is an important part of
> the plot, therefore he can be categorized as a relevant male character inside a film with a female
> protagonist. Out of the 17 films with female protagonists, 9 (52,94%) do not have relevant male co-
> protagonists. As for the films with male protagonists, the percentage is rather different. Out of the
> 32 films, only 12 (37,5%) of them have relevant female co-protagonists (films such as *Aladdin*,
> *Hercules*, or *Tarzan*) while 20 films hardly have female characters which are relevant (sometimes,
> as in *Dumbo*, they are hardly definable as secondary). (Galizia 2022: 76-77)

With the release of *Stranger World* (2022) and *Wish* (2023) the ratio has not changed, since
the first has a male protagonist while the latter has a female protagonist (bringing the ratio to

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[38] *Love & Basketball* is a 2000 American romantic sports drama film written and directed by Gina Prince-
Bythewood.

18 movies with female protagonists and 33 with males). The Walt Disney Animation Studios films with female protagonists are the following:

1. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)
2. *Cinderella* (1950)
3. *Alice in Wonderland* (1953)
4. *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)
5. *The Little Mermaid* (1989)
6. *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)
7. *Pocahontas* (1995)
8. *Mulan* (1998)
9. *Home on the Range* (2004)
10. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)
11. *Tangled* (2010)
12. *Frozen* (2013)
13. *Zootopia* (2016)
14. *Moana* (2016)
15. *Frozen II* (2019)
16. *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021)
17. *Encanto* (2021)
18. *Wish* (2023)

The main criterion used to create this list consists in whether the plotline devolves around the female character or not. It would be impossible to use as a criterion the number of lines that the female protagonist has, since, for example, *Aurora* (*The Sleeping Beauty*) is the protagonist of her story but has less than 20 minutes screen time and not so many lines. In the same way also *Ariel* (*The Little Mermaid*) does not have so many lines since during the plot she loses her voice. This criterion, therefore, would not have been the right approach to settle this list. When the plot devolves around the character, on the other hand, and the female character is vital for the plot to happen, that is, when the female character was actually considered to be the lead and, consequently, the film could be put into this list. It is obvious that in a film called *Hercules* the protagonist will be *Hercules* and the other characters will surround him. *Megara*, who is a co-lead, is part of the plot but she could be easily exchanged with another character with another

name and the film would still be called *Hercules*. In the same way the majority of the films above mentioned were included in the list. However, it was important to differentiate the movies with a female lead to those with a secondary character who is female (therefore a film such as *The Little Mermaid* from a film like *Hercules*). As stated, there are several other important female characters in other movies, but they are not the protagonists of the film (such as *Jasmine* in the film *Aladdin* or *Lady* in *Lady and the Tramp* who shares the lead with the *Tramp*). These 18 movies listed above have female characters as the main lead (and often male characters as co-protagonists). Disney's characters have influenced young children for generations, as Marcia Lieberman stated in her 1972 article *'Some Day My Prince Will Come':* *Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale*: «Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture. Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White are mythic figures who have replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses, and heroes for most children» (Lieberman 1972: 383–84). It is of no wonder, therefore, that these characters, and principally female leads, who are still so popular nowadays, are seen as role models by children.

In chapter 2 we talked about female characters in fairy tales and novels, and we analysed *Beauty and the Beast* and the purposes of its authors. Funny enough, the animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, released in 1991, was also an important turning point for female characters and for Walt Disney's animation studios too. The responsibility to create Belle and her story for this Disney animated film was given to Linda Woolverton, who shaped this Disney heroine as a feminist. Disney, in those years, had been harshly critiqued after *The Little Mermaid*'s success since Ariel seemed a little too much dependent on her co-protagonist Prince Eric. «"We were absolutely aware that comparisons to 'Little Mermaid' would be inevitable, because we were working in the same realm: A Disney fairy tale with a strong female lead," said Wise. (A/N Kirk Wise[39]) "We didn't want Belle's characterization to go in the same direction as Ariel's. Ariel was definitely the All-American teenager, while we pictured Belle as a little bit older, a little bit wiser and a little more sophisticated" » (Solomon 1989: 311).

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[39] Kirk Wise was born August 24, 1963 and is an American film director. His most famous works are *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Atlantis – The Lost Empire* for Walt Disney's Animation Studios.

Woolverton, therefore, was asked to write and create a female lead who would scream to the audience that she was strong (Berman 2016).

> Woolverton's fight to shape Belle into a new kind of Disney heroine was just that—a fight, every step of the way. The first woman to write an animated Disney film, she worked closely with Howard Ashman, the movie's lyricist, to create a female character who could see beyond the end of her hairbrush, "one that isn't based on being kind and taking the hits but smiling all the way through it," she says. "I just didn't feel like that's the message that we wanted to move into the next century with. And that's the Disney heroine that I grew up with." [...] Woolverton set to work on a script that reflected her self-directed mandate to move women and girls forward (Berman 2016: 2).

Was Belle perfect? Was she a fighter? Did she have to save the day to be seen as a feminist? Obviously not and Woolverton had a clear idea of who Belle had to be. However, the audience's look and criticism of Disney princesses have always been a bit rough. Ariel herself from *The Little Mermaid* was nothing but a young and curious girl who dreamt of the human world and happened to meet a love interest in the process. Not far, therefore, from Cinderella's destiny, whose dream was to go to the ball and happened to meet Prince Charming there. As Mei Huang pointed out in her 1990 research *Transforming the Cinderella Dream: From Frances Burney to Charlotte Brontë*:

> […] the Cinderella myth has functioned as a double-edged (or multiedged) ideological weapon. On the one hand, the code of propriety is carefully woven into a myth that romanticizes woman's subordinate and domesticated role within the patriarchy; on the other hand, the Protestant individualism that is simultaneously programmed into the plot inevitably arouses in women . . . a sense of individual dignity and an urge for self- realization […] the Cinderella theme is itself essentially ambiguous and dialogic, with a constant tension built on the desire/self-denial, passion/reason dichotomy (Huang 1990: 25-28)

Female Disney characters have been ambiguous, as Mei Huang says, but what many scholars believe is that this ambiguity has become crucial in the latest years because of the awareness that feminism and other movements have brought to light. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White above all too are nothing but animated characters from another era, from a society which wanted women to be in a certain role. As Mohammad Alsaraireh explains in his 2020 article *Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation of Male and Female Characters in the Animation Movie, FROZEN*: «Film reflects what is happening in the socio-society in terms of social problems and it also serves as a medium for the spread of culture» (Alsaraireh et al. 2020: 106). Although all these women were perfect "housewives' material" as women were taught to be back in those decades, they were also extremely strong, although obviously inside certain limits. What I think we tend to forget, probably because we are used to a vision

of strength which is possibly too didactic, is that strength has multiple ways of showing, it can hide behind resilience and patience, as well as behind sweetness and quietude.

Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* is a wonderful example of a positive, round, and dynamic female character, as well as many other Disney heroines, since they are all different and unique in their own characteristics. As Hanna Flint says, Mirabel from *Encanto* is also a positive heroine. She is not special, she does not have any characteristics that would define her as stronger than other female characters in the film (actually, she would be perceived as weaker, since she is not gifted as her family members). However, she is strong in her weakness, and she uses her strength to change her position and situation.

What happened to Disney heroines is that they changed with society, with culture, with the view of women through time. Does it mean that more recent heroines are always more positive than their older counterparts? The answer is: not exactly, but certainly they are contextualized in today's society (which, as we know, it still is not ideal). One of the most famous Disney films of the latest years was *Frozen*, which had 2 female leads. Anna and Elsa are two good examples of how female characters can be different, flawed and still strong. However, as Streiff and Dundes stated in their research *Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender- Stereotypes Its Most Powerful Princess*:

> At first glance, the familial theme seems to be an antidote to the commonplace female preoccupation with marriage and other gender stereotyping found in Disney movies. [...] Frozen ostensibly departs from gender-circumscribed plots. A closer look at Frozen, however, reveals questions about whether its princesses do indeed provide an improved model for young girls coming of age (Streiff, Dundes 2017: 1).

Frozen's as Alsaraireh and his colleagues state, «tries at showing the power of women. Disney's version of womanhood as personified in Elsa and Anna, is one that does not oppose to the dominant ideals of femininity» (Alsaraireh et al. 2020: 120). Elsa and Anna are more active and flawed, but they still have to maintain a standard of femininity, as the scholars say, and become, therefore, stereotypical while being what we described earlier on "strong female characters". As Jeff Gomez stated in his article *Why 'Frozen' Became The Biggest Animated Movie Of All Time* on April 2014 for *Business Insider*: «On a recent edition of the Pop Culture Happy Hour podcast, NPR's Linda Holmes observed that Disney feature animation has spent the past decade or so making up for the hoary sexism of the previous 40 years. By refuting the notion of love at first sight, and by subverting the salvation heroines can receive by love's first

(male) kiss, "Frozen" drops the cherry on the sundae» (Gomez 2014: 1). Disney, therefore, has tried to subvert the image of its female heroines but, as cinema has been doing, it slipped into a vicious circle. Not only in the latest years they tried to disown their own old protagonists, as if they are ashamed of creating them, but they have also actively been part of the creation of new impossible female stereotypes (such as the birth of the strong female character).

What is the answer then? To keep characters stereotypical as in literary fairy tales? To create new but still stereotypically strong characters? Feminists would answer that there is no stereotypical woman and that the only answer would be to have more representation of the female gaze, which has started to be an important topic in gender studies since the 90s (Kaplan 1983). The truth is that female characters were for a long time created by what scholars call the male gaze. As Ann Kaplan states:

> To begin with, men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it. […] By forcing our gaze to dwell on the images by slowing down or stopping the projection that creates patriarchal voyeurism, we may be able to provide a "reading against the grain" that will give us information about our positioning as spectators. (Kaplan 1983: 31).

And since they were created by men whose gaze carries the power of action, it was difficult to have characters that would go far from what men wanted. Does that mean that only women can write or create female characters? Certainly not, but possibly, caring more about the female gaze and creating characters that are rounder and more realistic could settle the record straight once and for all.

4.3 Concluding remarks.

Male gaze, female gaze and characters are subject that has been studied for a while by scholar from many academic fields. The aim of this chapter, however, was to point out how, also in more contemporary products such as animated films, female characters are not always positively depicted. Certainly, it does not mean that everything done by males until now is wrong and that only females could create good characters which are women. As Ann Kaplan wrote in 1983: «This is by no means to argue that return to a matriarchy would be either possible or desirable. What rather has to happen is that we move beyond long-held cultural and linguistic patterns of oppositions: male/female (as these terms currently signify); dominant/submissive; active/passive; nature/civilization; order/chaos; matriarchal/patriarchal» (Kaplan 1983: 206).

The real answer to have female characters which could potentially be good role models for children is to subvert stereotypes and have realistic protagonists which do not follow only one gaze but are as flawed and imperfect as every human being is and as every child has the right to become. In the next chapter we are going to analyse characters in animation who are inclusive and represent also minorities. Moreover, we are going to see if the bodies of female characters in animation have a standard set by society or if this standard is being replaced by more diverse examples.

Chapter 5 - From a standard vision of the female body in children's animation to the research of something different

Although we already dealt with body representation, it is crucial to discuss thoroughly about bodies and inclusion in animation, especially because we only focused on Barbie as an example. Again, the topic is going to be discussed on an education, pedagogic and transmediatic literary point of view and not on a psychological point of view. The ethical matters and issues that are born from how children perceive themselves because of society's way of exhibiting physical examples cannot be part of this thesis for two reasons. The first being that the topic of this research is merely literary, the second being that such important topic would need an entire separate analysis. For this reason, this chapter will focus on examples of inclusivity in animation and how bodies are differentiated in transmediatic children literature, without reserving an extensive part of the chapter to the psychological matters of the subject.

Since Barbie is not the only female representation in animation for children, a more thorough analysis is necessary to speak about bodies. Again, however, it is crucial to speak about the "source" of many transmediatic children's literature products: fairy tales.

Characters (whether human or supernatural) and objects are characterized by limpid edges, by consistency and by rigid figures, according to Lüthi. Fairy tale characters emerged as figures with no precise body and as mentioned in chapter 2, they are completely immune to any physical and psychological change (therefore they have no depth). The bodies of the characters are described in fairy tales only when these features are crucial for the plot, otherwise they are superfluous. Details, therefore, are not always well explained (Lüthi 1982). Some examples are the characters of Snow White or of Rapunzel, both from the Grimm Brothers' collection of fairy tales. Besides, being depicted as extremely beautiful women, both descriptions of these women were central to the plot. Snow White had black hair, white skin, and red cheeks (hence her name). Rapunzel had extremely long hair, in most versions of the fairy tale described as blonde, which were necessary in the plot as they are the only way other characters can get into

the tower, she is segregated in. However, other characters such as the protagonists of *Beauty and the Beast* or of *Hansel and Gretel* are not described. There are often generic and stereotypical descriptions, such as being "beautiful" or similar, but nothing too precise. Thus, in Villeneuve's version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the protagonist is described as follows: «Every intelligent person, who saw her in her true light, was eager to give her the preference over her sisters. In the midst of her greatest splendour, although distinguished by her merit, she was so handsome that she was called "The Beauty"» (Planché 2022: 251).

Max Lüthi studied thoroughly descriptions in fairy tales. In one of his most famous studies, he pointed out that in fairy tales only a few colours are used. In his book *The European Folktale: Form and nature* Lüthi stated that the main colours in fairy tales were divided in two categories: the binomen gold-silver and the trinomial red-white-black (easily connectable with ancient legends from the Latin and Greek world, like Plato's *Chariot Allegory*). Beside these pure colours described above, according to Lüthi, there were alsosome compound colours typical of the fairy tales, in particular grey and light blue. A completely and strangely absent colour in every common fairy tale description, is green, the colour of nature. Moreover, the Swiss scholar highlighted that there is a complete absence of the polychrome in fairy tales and stated that fairy tales are mostly inclined to be mineralized and metalized (which means that it is common in fairy tales and folk tales to prefer the precious metals to other generic ones, therefore, a crown would possibly be golden instead of being made of copper) (Lüthi 1982).

Colours, descriptions, bodies are all seldom described in fairy tales and, if they are, it is because they are central to the moral or the plot of the tale. What happens in animation? Since there are little if no guidelines at all, how were and are female characters portrayed in animation which is targeted also to children?

5.1 From fairy tales to animation: where are the bodies?

As we already said, bodies in fairy tales are hardly ever described, unless they are substantial for the plot or the character. This obviously puts animation in front of an immense impasse: to create characters with no inspiration if not a story without any descriptions. It is striking the case of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. The character of the Beast, which we know so well was actually drawn in pictures and, later in the 20th century, animated in many different ways. As

Charles Solomon writes in his book *Tale as old as time – the art and making of Beauty and the Beast* while quoting Glen Keane (the Beast's animator) who worked on the 1991 movie:

> Over the centuries, illustrators have depicted the beast as everything from a walrus to a cyclops, but he's usually been drawn along the lines of a bear, a lion, or an ape. [...] Additional inspiration came from a display of stuffed animals. "I saw a buffalo head in a taxidermist's shop near the Studio, and I realized there's a sadness to the way a buffalo hangs his head that I thought Beast should have" he continues. "[...] we weren't just drawing a cartoon character, that this was a real beast, I took the beard of the buffalo, as well as the massive head, the mane of a lion, a bearlike body, a gorilla's brow [...] the tusks of a boar and the tail and hind legs of a wolf. That's pretty much his genesis. (Solomon 2017: 103-104)

In the original story by Villeneuve and later by Beaumont, both writers described a transformation of the Beast's character, but in both cases, they did not give actual descriptions, beside the general idea that the Beast was feral and hairy. Their description concerns more the whole scene and situation instead of the actual description of the change that the body of the character is experiencing. Glen Keane, therefore, worked with his imagination, exactly as many other illustrators and animators did before him.

Although this is clearly the most outstanding example of fairy tales' body characters (or one of the most striking), the representation this chapter focuses on is slightly different. Obviously, what we must speak about are female characters, and our sample will be principally animation with characters who resemble real human beings. The reason why the sample does not include animation with stylized characters (which resemble humans but do not search for accuracy) is that the main focus of the chapter is to check how much diversity is in more accurate animation. Products such as *The Owl House* (2020-2023) or as *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* (2015-2019) cannot therefore be useful for this analysis. Thus, also products with anthropomorphic animals such as *Peppa Pig* (2004-present) or *Bluey* (2018-present) cannot be considered in this chapter. There are several examples of female characters which are animated as anthropomorphic animals which could be considered in the chapter, such as Lola Bunny from *Space Jam* (1996). As Hanna Flint says in her book *Strong Female Character*: «Lola Bunny might fall victim to the weird sexualization of female animated characters, but she is depicted as the best player of all the Looney Tunes. She runs rings around her pretty much all-male comrades». However, although she has some positive traits, she would not fit the issue of this chapter. Sexualization of female characters however is a big issue in cinematography and we will briefly discuss this matter while analyzing some animated women.

One of the first more "realistic" female animated character that was created was Betty Boop. Her figure evolved with time. However, she was certainly not a character who complimented women. Of course, it is important to contextualize her since she was created at the beginning of the 20th century. As Charles Solomon describes her in his book *Enchanted drawings – The History of Animation*:

> The artists developed Betty into a dumb but endearing character, capable of delivering lines like " I guess the people who moved out don't live here anymore." She was the arche typical flapper, the speakeasy Girl Scout with a heart of gold— already something of an anachronism in 1930. Despite the advent of the Great Depression, the Betty Boop cartoons remained rooted in the Jazz Age. In many ways, Betty was the first truly feminine animated character. Up to this point, cartoon females had essentially been males with long eyelashes, high-heeled shoes and a few dainty gestures. Ms. Boop had a decidedly female shape and, more importantly, a convincing feminine grace to her movements. Betty's femininity was reflected in her considerable sex appeal. (Solomon 1989: 74-75)

Unfortunately, sex appeal and sexuality has always been a big issue with female characters, as we aforementioned what Hanna Flint stated about Lola Bunny. In chapter 4 we described what male and female gaze are and a big problem in cinematography is the fact that screenplays were written for a long time only by males, resulting in characters being created only on a men's perspective. «This observation coincides with the mainstream expectation of genders in that men hold authority and leadership which usually increases with age, while women are in more subordinate roles and often sexualized, which is why younger women are preferred» (Yang et al. 2020: 13). Moreover, female characters tend to be submitted to an evident beauty standard. As Baker-Sperry and Hrauerholz underlined in their 2003 article *The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales*:

> The social importance of the feminine beauty ideal lies in its ability to sustain and to reproduce gender inequality (Bartky 1990; Currie 1997; Freedman 1986; Wolf 1991). The feminine beauty ideal can be seen as a normative means of social control whereby social control is accomplished through the internalization of values and norms that serve to restrict women's lives (Fox 1977). In this way, women internalize norms and adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their relative pow-erlessness, making external forces less necessary. (Baker-Sperry, Grauerholz 2003: 712)

Beauty standards have always been an inescapable part of society. In every decade, century and in any kind of society, from the more contemporary ones to the oldest and more rural ones, beauty was something to be researched. Clearly, the standard changed through time and with different point of views which came from different cultures. However, a tendency of cinematography, as Bazzini and her collegues state in their 2010 article *Do Animated Disney Characters Portray and Promote the Beauty–Goodness Stereotype?* is that more often than not

beauty is related to goodness, especially in animation. The better is the character the prettier it will look.

> Another form of media often thought to portray the what-is-beautiful-is-good stereotype is movies. Smith, McIntosh, and Bazzini (1999) conducted a study that looked at the PA stereotype in the top-grossing films from 1940 to 1989. Raters watched 100 films (20 from each decade) and rated the central, secondary, and peripheral characters on a list of social attributes and life outcomes. They found that the attractiveness of a character was strongly and positively correlated with how morally good that character was portrayed. Greater physical beauty was associated with higher levels of romantic activity and better life outcomes, and was weakly related to higher intelligence and slightly lower levels of aggression. These findings were true for both male and female characters. (Bazzini et al. 2010: 2689)

This topic has also been thoroughly dealt with by Elena Gianini Belotti and by Loredana Lipperini in their books *Dalla parte delle bambine* (On young girls' side) and *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine* (Still on young girl's side). The authors discuss how female characters in fairy tales, and therefore in a large part of animation, are often divided in princesses/protagonists which are beautiful and good and in witches, who are evil and often really ugly (Gianini Belotti 1973 & Lipperini 2007). Bazzini and her colleagues also investigated this issue in their article *Do Animated Disney Characters Portray and Promote the Beauty–Goodness Stereotype?* and stated: «Taken together, the current investigations empirically support the anecdotal observations that animated Disney movies promote the stereotype that what is beautiful is good. Indeed, in some Disney films, attractive characters are portrayed as being more morally virtuous and less aggressive» (Bazzini et al. 2010: 2705).

As previously discussed, fairy tales are made with stereotypes, most of the time, and do not create characters which are multi-faceted. However, animation has more space to have round and dynamic characters not necessarily stereotypical. Unfortunately, this effort to change how female characters are portrayed is not always done and numerous scholars, León González included, underlined how beauty standards in any kind of media can pilot children's development in a negative way.

> Very young children may be especially vulnerable to media's messages and beauty standards (Harriger, 2012): Their emerging cognitive, social, and emotional development and lack of experience means that they have difficulties in understanding these messages (Hutchinson & Calland, 2011; Simpson, Kwitowski, Boutte, Gow, & Mazzeo, 2016) and in differentiating between reality and fantasy (Calvert & Wilson, 2011; Harriger, 2012; Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). At the preoperational stage of development (2–7 years), children tend to focus on concrete and perceptually salient aspects of a stimulus (Piaget, 1929). This characteristic, known as centration, means that young children are more likely to be influenced purely by a character's physical appearance than children at a later developmental stage. (Gonzáles et al. 2020: 6027)

González was not the only scholar who underlined this issue. In 2016 Sarah Coyne and her colleagues wrote the article *Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children* where they stated that «Research has found that boys can learn gender stereotypes from watching female heroines in the media and vice versa» (Coyne et al. 2016: 2). Gender stereotypes in feminine portrayal, therefore, do not affect only young girls but also young boys' perception of females.

Since in this chapter we are discussing mainly animation that portrays human-like female characters, Disney Princesses and protagonists need to be considered. It is important to underline that the Disney Princess Lineup is a media franchise and toy line. As Coyne and her colleagues explain in their 2016 article *Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children*:

> One of the most popular types of media and merchandise for young girls is the Disney Princess line. The line is highly profitable, with sales in 2012 alone exceeding more than $3 billion (Goudreau, 2012). There is some public concern regarding the effect that Disney Princesses may have on young girls (e.g., Orenstein, 2011). However, there is little empirical research examining how Disney Princesses are portrayed in the media and what effect they might have on children's gender role development, attitudes, and behavior. (Coyne et al. 2016: 1)

Not every Disney female character is included in this line, but only the most famous ones. Some protagonists or co-protagonists, such as Jane from 1999 *Tarzan*, are not in the line-up because the rights of the original story (in this case of the *Tarzan Series* by American author Edgar Rice Burroughs) are still held by the heirs of the creator, therefore Disney cannot put the character in other project not approved by them. Other protagonists might not be in the line-up because of their movie's lack of notoriety. Nonetheless Disney female characters are numerous and not only part of the Princess line-up, although the list of these characters in particular holds the most famous Disney heroines:

1. Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, 1937)
2. Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950)
3. Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959)
4. Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989)
5. Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991)

6. Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 1992)

7. Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995)

8. Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998)

9. Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009)

10. Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010)

11. Merida (*The Brave*, 2012)

12. Moana (*Moana*, 2016)

13. Raya (*Raya and the Last Dragon*, 2021)

Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*, for example, are not part of this list because their figures are part of their own frozen merchandise. The Disney princess line-up is principally a merchandising franchise, therefore Elsa and Anna are not included, since the *Frozen* franchise still sells its own merchandise separated from the rest. Disney heroines have been investigated in the field of gender-studies for years. However, the 2011 article named *Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses* which Dawn Elizabeth England and her colleagues wrote is particularly crucial. In their study, the scholars underline how stereotypes are still present in Disney heroines' portrayal: «It is apparent that gendered stereotypes and behaviors are still very prevalent in the Disney Princess line, though their depiction has become more complex over the years, reflecting changing gender roles and expectations in American society. Gender expectations were less complex when the first Disney Princess movies were produced» (England et al. 2011: 563).

Perhaps what is the most controverse topic regarding Disney heroines' that also links to scholars' discourse such as Gonzaléz or Coyne's is the one about beauty. As in fairy tales the majority of good or positive Disney female characters are beautiful, while the enemy counterpart is often ugly. An example are Ursula and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, or Maleficent and Aurora from *The Sleeping Beauty*. As England and her colleagues state, gender expectations were less complex when the first movies with heroines were produces, however also in latest movies, such as the Cinderella live action, these representations stand. In Moana (2016) Te Kā is the villain of the story. At the end of the film, it is discovered that she is the angry and incomplete version of Te Fiti (whose heart was stolen by Maui), therefore, Te Kā transforms back into Te Fiti after Moana gives her back her heart. Although this is a more recent

production, and although Te Kā/Te Fiti is a goddess, she has a feminine portrayal and her appearance changes from ugly to beautiful when she turns from evil to good.

Beauty standards, therefore, are a big issue also in animation. With them body representation is quite endangered. Not only for decades of cinematography characters in general were, for example, mainly Caucasian, but they also followed social rules which decided what was prettier and what was not, and thinner bodies, still today, are often preferred to bigger bodies. In the next section of the chapter, we are going to discuss this exact topic with its own case-studies in animation.

5.2 Forgetting the standard: inclusion is the right conclusion.

Female characters have not always been positively represented in animation, and in cinematography in general. Not only women were depicted as love interests or sidekicks' characters who did not have a lot of depth for a long time, but also for decades ethnical representation and little differentiated bodies have been rarely explored. As we already stated for older animation, older films were created in times when society and rights were conceived differently, and gender expectations were less complex (England 2011). Therefore, women have been described, written, portrayed and animated in different ways depending on the historical moment they were created in. However, it is of no surprise that for many years inclusion was not an important topic for animators (or filmmakers), neither in Disney nor in other animation studios.

Inclusion started being discussed in the latest 30 years and the first matter of this issue which was cleared was the ethnicity inclusion. In the 90s Disney *in primis* started creating new stories with characters from all over the world. Animated features such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Mulan* (1998) or *Pocahontas* (1995). However, as Hanna Flint states in her book *Strong Female Character*:

> This Arab princess was overtly sexualised in a way that her white predecessors were not and even in the nineties it didn't sit right with me. When Ariel is half-naked with just a bikini top and tail to protect her modesty, it all looks rather innocent. Even the 'Kiss the Girl' sequence is awkward and endearing but Jasmine's turquoise costume seemed solely designed to titillate. […] Jasmine uses seduction as a distraction tactic despite being a sheltered fifteen-year-old whose life has been rigidly structured by her overprotective father. The assumption here is that sexual promiscuity is an inherent trait. (Flint 2022: 19)

Flint is not the only writer who noticed this sexualization of another eethnicity, she quotes Bourenane Abderrahmene, who wrote the article *Authenticity and discourses in Aladdin (1992)* and states: «Jasmine is represented according to a Western imagination of the oriental female figure; she is over-sexualized through the belly dancer outfit that she wears all over the film and she is confined in the palace until her decision to escape. Jasmine is presented with a tiger pet in an attempt to push the limits of oriental exoticism and danger» (Abderrahmene 2020: 245). Moreover, Jasmine is not the only Disney heroine who underwent this treatment, Esmeralda from the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* was also extremely sexualized (although her appearence was described and decided more into details by *Notre Dame de Paris'* writer Victor Hugo (in this case the animated feature did not come from a fairy tale and the source material was more descriptive). Jasmine, however, was extremely sexualized and put into a product which did not respect the original story. Although the animated feature is set in an Indian-like country, the story of *Aladdin* from the *One Thousand and One Nights* is set in an Arab country, therefore in the Middle East.

The first attempts to include different characters and body features in animation, therefore, did not respect much the source material or the actual ethnicities. With a few exceptions from other studios such as *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) by DreamWorks, which animated characters of different eethnicities with realistic deetails such as the Egyptians inhabitants and the Jews who were enslaved during the Pharaos times. Inclusion, however, does not only consist of ethnical inclusion, but it incorporates gender inclusion, sexual orientation inclusion and different bodies inclusion. In this chapter we will analyse bodies inclusion Gender and sexual inclusion, however, are not less important, they just are not correct for this issue.

To have different body shapes in human-like animated characters is still today a challenge. In the above-mentioned Disney Princess Line-up, the only slightly different princesses are Meerida (from the Disney-Pixar film *The Brave* – 2012) and Moana (from the Walt Disney Animation Movie *Moana* – 2016). All the other princesses and heroines are "standard-like". Their bodies are all slender, slim, fit or with proportions hard to reach. León González stated with his colleages in his research *Associations Between Media Representations of Physical, Personality, and Social Attributes by Gender: A Content Analysis of Children's Animated Film Characters*:

Most characters (66.2%) were depicted as having an average body size. However, male characters were displayed as large or heavy significantly more frequently than females (26.2% and 10.9%, respectively). There was also a statistically significant gender difference for height, with male characters represented as tall more frequently than females (25% and 8.7%, respectively). Males were also depicted as muscular (14.3%) more frequently than females (4.3%). Prevalence of portrayed attractiveness was higher among female characters in comparison with males (19.6% and 10.7%, respectively). However, gender differences for these latter two characteristics did not reach statistical significance. (Gonzáles et al. 2020: 6036)

Body size is still a taboo in animation, beside more cartoonish animation (those characters with exaggerated features that are needed to depict stereotypically the character) it is more common for bad guys to have diverse bodies. From Capitan Hook who lost a hand, to Ursula's and Governor Ratcliffe's overweight bodies it is clear that diversity is more common in secondary characters or in the enemies instead on the protagonists. In the latest years, however, as already discussed, some things started to change, although not to an extreme. From Merida (young and pale and not yet a woman since she is stil sixteen years old) to Moana (who is sixteen, Polynesian and has an atletic body) to Mirabel in *Encanto* (who, besides, being Colombian, has also a truthful adolescent body and wears glasses). Disney heroines started being created as diverse, looking the age that they are and with different body shapes, although they still have somehow average bodies (they are not extremely slender all the time, but their sizes are still in the standard side).

It was an interesting case, however, in 2021 the representation of another character of the film *Encanto*: Luisa. The 60th Walt Disney Animation Studios Film is set in Colombia and its plot focuses on the Madrigal's family. Mirabel is the protagonist, and she is the only member of the family without a supernatural gift. Her sisters, Isabela, and Luisa, have the powers, respectively, of nature and strength. It is Luisa the real surprise of the film. Although Mirabel is also an interesting choice as a protagonist, again for her diverse features, the real battle the animators had to fight was for Luisa's character. As explained in the article *A trousers matter: are Disney's female characters clothes of the latest animated and live action films empowering or a weak façade?*:

Regarding this, the biggest change in Disney happened in 2021 with the release of the film Encanto. The film has several female characters in the plot, beside the protagonist, and the biggest step Disney has ever done comes from one of them. One of the protagonist's sisters, Luisa, possesses the gift of super-strength and for the first time Disney decided to give a female character some physical features which stepped out from the stereotypical Disney character. […] Luisa's character in *Encanto* is the first positive example of refusing stereotypes. A character can be multi-faceted, strong, brave, and at the same time feminine (and vice-versa). Although fairy tale language is simple, simplicity should not be an excuse for stereotypes to be part of biased beliefs. (Galizia 2022: 80-81)

Meg Park was one of Luisa's animators during the production of *Encanto* and Juan Pablo Reyes Lancaster-Jones quoted an interview with her as she described the making of the character in the book *The art of Disney Encanto*: «"She was one of my favorite characters to design. We looked at a lot of female Olympic athletes, mostly hammer and shot-put throwers. I like that she has a soft feminine side to her, playing with the balance of a strong figure." - Meg Park, Visual Development Artist» (Reyes Lancaster-Jones 2021: 90). Luisa is a female character who is not only extremely feminine but also physically strong. This oxymoronic depiction and look she has gone against any stereotype and prototype that ever existed in cinematography or fairy tales.

It is somehow discouraging the fact that we had to wait more or less a hundred years of animation to reach a female character who was not sexualized or stereotyped, was not with a standard body and was inclusive for a certain ethnicity and other minorities. However, Luisa Madrigal should be an example for future animation works of any kind to be inclusive in many different ways and, more importantly, to not fall into stereotypes when depicting women.

5.3 Concluding remarks.

What conclusion can we draw from these representations? Writing and depicting female characters in transmediatic literature is no easy task and doing it while being inclusive and non-stereotypical is a challenge that must be welcomed. It is important to state, however, that numerous studies have been conducted about children's reaction to Disney Princesses and heroines and, although they are often animated with standard and slender body types and figures, they have not been related to low body esteem in young girls. As Coyne and her colleagues reported in their article *Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children*: «The second hypothesis was that engagement with Disney Princesses would be related to poor body esteem in girls, due to the perpetuation of the thin ideal by the Disney princess characters. However, princess engagement was not associated with concurrent body esteem for either boys or girls. This finding is somewhat surprising […]» (Coyne et al. 2016: 14).

It is clear that stereotypes do not derive simply from Disney characters, as much as they do not come from the creation of the Barbie doll (cf. Chapter 3.2). These products however are a

response to society and society's stereotypes. As already stated in chapter 1.2, dealing with social media in this thesis would be way too dispersive. However, it could be a new perspective to explicate in a secondary research to compare the stereotypes that can be found in female characters throughout literature and the stereotypes which are shown in social media available to children. It could also be an interesting topic to study what television programs or other adult products are available to children and how they could also become part of the problem in showing stereotypes to the youngsters.

Society still has to accept many issues that post-feminists are pointing out, from the idea of a non-binary existence of gender to a more inclusive world (whether it being literary, cinematographic or, more generally, the real world). However, as stated in the 2022 article *A trousers matter: are Disney's female characters clothes of the latest animated and live action films empowering or a weak façade?*: «It could be stated that there is no right way to create any character […] since it is unlikely for genders to be deconstructed soon in audio-visual communication such as animated films, having more female characters and more representation is most definitely the right path to follow» (Galizia 2022: 81-82). Inclusion is the right conclusion. It was demonstrated with *Encanto*'s Luisa, and it will be demonstrated again in the future. The less stereotypes will be used the more female characters are going to be good role models and examples for children in their flawed, round, and dynamic way.

Conclusions

«Children, when not impeded by cultural biases, choose toys, games and partners
that are of their innate tastes. The media, society and the toy industry force
educators to spend much time reversing their carefully taught messages. Two viable
approaches are role modeling and creating a bullying-free safe space that endorse
play, based on personal choice. Once given permission to embrace every crayon
color, any dress- up clothing, all toys or playmates they naturally desire, students
socialize gender-free without reservation»
(Maynard 2012: 94)

It is important to emphasize the importance of inclusion and representation of female characters in products for children. Although we can recognize some positive impact made by diverse and dynamic female characters (who can be good role models for children since they challenge stereotypes and can empower them), it is crucial to continue to create new examples. In this thesis I thought that it would be important to discuss the evolution of transmediatic children's literature through changing times, in order to focus thoroughly on how nowadays we can have some positive examples of female characters in contemporary products (also because of feminism and post-feminism social and ethical commitment in society and, particularly in storytelling for children).

Throughout this work we have focused on fictional female characters through centuries, decades, different media and storytelling styles, paying attention to how they have had an impact on children and society and how society itself has had an impact on creating them through time. The focus of the thesis was on positive representations of female portrayals opposite to outmoded ones. In particular, we delved into the representation of "strong female characters" as a prototype and we discussed how it itself started becoming a stereotype. Moreover, we have pointed out how in Disney animation the ratio of films with male and female protagonists is still unbalanced, emphasizing the significance of female representation in media for children.

The aim of this thesis is to challenge stereotypes in order to reflect on how women are depicted in media for children and how we could create characters to empower them. Highlighting the significance of female representation in media is crucial in today's society, and it is important to insert such discussion in a post-feminism discourse. Stereotypes can be understandable when contextualised in a certain society or historical period. However, since this research also indicates a gender disparity in contemporary cartoon movies, the conclusion

is that the research of a better depiction for female characters is not over yet. Female representation in cinema has improved, but it still lags. Further research on the matter and maybe on more case studies is needed in order to create new and relevant findings. Some more research on other animated characters, maybe from even more diverse sources, may create a thesaurus of empowering female characters in animation.

Children's products which are part of children's literature are immeasurable and fortunately, female characters are having more and more space with time. Representation is still nowadays a big issue, not only in children's productions, however, new steps are being made with no doubts. Certainly, the passive characters which were not actively living their own stories in ancient fairy tales are not anymore, a used narrative. Nonetheless, it is still hard to have completely positive role models to follow. From Barbie to Disney Princesses, many characters and products for children were created as positive role models but ended up becoming something never completely positive and to look up to.

Stereotypes were for long used and abused in transmediatic products, for children too. Moreover, new ideas of female characters started becoming prototypes, nowadays, which are also filled with stereotypes and cannot be used as completely positive "idols" for children.

Representation is still an immense topic that has hardly been scratched. Characters are now more diverse, and productions try to be as respectful as possible with different cultures, religions, and sexual orientations. However, after more than a century of cinema and more than a thousand year of fiction, the few examples of good representation are not enough. We do have people of different cultures in transmediatic children's literature but theey should be even less stereotypical and definitely more frequent. Creating positive role models for children is possible but several issues (such as stereotypes, representation and all those topics that we highlighted in this thesis – plus more from other research) are definitely to be talked about and applied in children's literature (and universally in all productions).

Finally, it is clear that many topics discussed in this thesis are created by adults in an adult world where society dictates rules that we accept as standards. However, as psychologist Alison Gopnik wrote in her 2009 book *The Philosophical Baby*:

Children aren't just defective adults, primitive grown-ups gradually attaining our perfection and complexity. Instead, children and adults are different forms of Homo sapiens. They have very different, though equally complex and powerful, minds, brains, and forms of consciousness, designed to serve different evolutionary functions. […] But you could equally say that, when it comes to imagination and learning, prefrontal immaturity allows children to be superadults. (Gopnik 2009: 9-13)

Children will eventually become adults who will be part of the society that adults build. It is crucial for them to have positive role models and examples to follow. As children they have imagination and learning that make them superior to adults, but once they have grown, they should be able to be surrounded by models that are more inclusive and diverse as possible, in order for them to create a future society more heterogeneous.

Appendix I

CREPEREIA TRYPHAENA (ORIGINAL LATIN POEM)

45   In nigros circum taciturna lucos
     fugerat cornix, repetebat urbis
    turba corvorum memorum quadratae
 saxa Palati, cum solum Tuscum decimo die te

50   redditit maio, Crepereia, soli
     pronubam post innumera induentem
   saecula gemmam. Vitrea virgo sub aqua latebas,
    at comans summis adiantus undis

55   nabat. An nocti dederas opacae
   spargere crinis ? Sed quid antiquis oculi videnti
    nunc mihi effeti lacrimis madescunt?
    quas premo curas alioque eundem

60 corde dolorem? Murteum vidi memor ipse sertum
     quosque fulsisti religata crinis,
    et manus iunctas tenuisque dextris
      farris aristas.

65   Nota, post longos amethystos annos
     quae refert alas oculis ruentis
    gryphis et cervam, Venerique pupa
  nota negata est. Crastina, sacris Lemurum tenebris,

70   nocte, cum pictae volucres tacebunt
     et canes, nudo pede per soporam
   deferar umbram, et fabas sumam iaciamque nigras
    pone per noctem noviesque dicam

75   «His fabis, manes, redimo, Tryphaenae,
  meque meosque». Dumque tu aversum sequeris manuque
    tangis exsangui levis umbra dona,
    tinnulo parcam moriturus aeri

80　　　　respiciamque. En ades. Sic lectus eburnus olim
　　　　　　pallidam, me flente, nefas, habebat.
　　　　　　　Sic eras, collo nitidum reflexo
　　　　　　　　fusa capilium.

85　　　　　Flamen oblitas grave tibiarum
　　　　　　nunc procul flenti mihi pellit auris
　　　　　neniaeque urguent resonoque maesta
　　　praefica lesso. Ducitur funus per aprica ripae,

90　　　　　murmur etrusco Tiberi ciente
　　　　　　triste, per sepes ubi gignit albos
　　spina corymbos. Floridam non te ruber igne Vesper
　　　　　matris abduxit gremio morantem

95　　　　nec faces «Hymen» pueri levantes
　　　　concinuerunt. Cymbiis fusis ego rite lactis
　　　　　condidi mutis animam sepulcris
　　　　edidique amens «Have have» supremum

100　　ipse «Tryphaena». Vesper adflavit pariis columnis
　　　　　　luteum molis iubar Hadrianae,
　　　　　　Pincium tranant fugiente corvi
　　　　　　　agmine collem,

105　　　cum rapi sensim videor silentisque
　　　　　inmemor cordis per inane ferri,
　　　　　iam tuae frustra revocante matris
　　　　　　　voce Philetum.
　　　　　　（Pascoli 1966: pp. 504-508）

Appendix II

45   Già tutt'intorno le cornacchie
erano fuggite taciturne entro i neri boschetti;
frotte di corvi, memori della Città Quadrata,
tornavano ai sassi del Palatino;

in quell'ora, o Crepereia,
nel dì dieci di maggio, il suolo etrusco
50   ti restituì al sole: al dito, dopo tanto passar di
secoli, portavi ancora la gemma del fidanzamento.

Ti celavi, o fanciulla, nell'acqua cristallina;
al sommo dell'acqua ondeggiava il
55   chiomato adianto. Avevi forse consentito alla
buia notte di sciogliere i tuoi capelli?

Ma perche ora, nel vederti, gli stanchi occhi
mi si inumidiscono di un pianto antico?
Che cos'è questo affanno, che è questo dolore
60   che mi stringe il cuore? È lo stesso il dolore, ma il cuore è un altro.

Vidi coi miei occhi, ricordo,
il serto di mirto e i tuoi capelli annodati
nel fulgido acconciamento di nozze, e le mani congiunte
e le sottili spighe di farro nella destra.

65   Riconosco l'ametista, in cui dopo
tanti anni torno a vedere inciso l'impetuoso
volar del grifo e la cerva; riconosco
la bambola promessa invano a Venere.

Domani, nella notte, nelle tenebre
sacre ai Lèmuri, quando i variopinti uccelli
70   taceranno e taceranno i cani, verrò coi piedi
scalzi nell'ora del sonno e del buio,

porterò con me le fave nere, le getterò
nella notte dietro le spalle e per nove
volte dirò: « Con queste fave, o Mani
di Trifena, riscatto me e i miei».

Io terrò la faccia rivolta altrove e tu
mi seguirai, ombra leggera, toccando i doni con
la mano esangue; ma non scuoterò il bronzo tinnulo;
anch'io voglio morire; e mi volterò a guardarti.

Ecco, sei qui: pallida sei come già
(oh tristezza!) sul tuo letto d'avorio, e io piangevo.
Cosí eri, e sparsa avevi sul
collo reclinato la chioma lucente.

Di lontano, come un soffio, odo ora nel pianto
giungermi alle orecchie un dimenticato grave suono di tibie.
Oh quant'angoscia in questo canto funebre
e nel mesto risuonante lagno delle lamentatrici!

Va il corteo funebre lungo la sponda
che il sole avvolge; triste mormora
l'etrusco Tevere; va tra le siepi ove fioriscono
i bianchi corimbi del biancospino.

Te, florida di giovinezza, non l'igneo
Vespero tolse riluttante alle braccia materne,
né a te i fanciulli, levando alte le faci,
cantarono l'imeneo.

Al suolo versai, secondo il rito,
le ciotole di latte, chiusi la tua anima
nel muto sepolcro, e dissi, disperato,
l'ultimo saluto: « Addio, Trifena, addio!»

Vespero già sfiora con la sua luce d'oro
le marmoree colonne della Mole Adriana;
branchi di corvi in fuga
passano volando sul Pincio;

ed ecco, a poco a poco, mi sento rapire,

e come dileguare nel vuoto, immemore d'un cuore

ormai silenzioso; invano la voce di tua madre tenta

ricondurmi indietro; invano mi chiama — Filèto!

(Pascoli 1966: pp. 505-509 - Traduzione di Ugo Enrico Paoli)

CREPEREIA TRIPHAENA (ENG TRANSLATION)

The silent crow had returned to the black woods; the crowd of ravens, remembering the quadrangular City, flew back to the Palatine rocks.

When on the 10th of May the Etruscan soil gave you, Tryphaena, back to the sun. After so many centuries you still were willing to wear your engagement ring.

A young girl you were hidden in the bright water, but your maiden hair was swimming in the waves of the water as foliage. Or did you agree that the dark night would spread your hair?

But why are my whitered eyes wet with tears from the past when I watch this? What sorrows do I oppress, the same pain in another heart?

I myself have seen, I remember well, the crown of myrtle, and your knotted hair which made you shine, and your hands joined together and the thin ears of spelt in the right hands.

Yes, I know the amethyst which after long years brings to our eyes the wings of the impetous griffin and the dear; I know the puppet which has been refused to Venus.

Tomorrow at night, in the sacred darkness of the feast of the Lemures, when the multicolored birds and the dogs will be silent, I will go barefoot in the sleeping darkness

and I will take the black beans and throw them behind me during the night, and nine times I will say: "With these beans, I redeem the spirit of Tryphaena and of myself and my beloved ones".

While you will follow me, while I look forward, you will touch the gifts with your bloodless hands, as a light shadow. And I, sure that I will die, I will abstain from the bronze, and I will look back.

There you are. In this way, the ivory bed held you, pale as you were, while I was crying, o unjust Fate. So you were, with your neck reclining and your abundantly shining hair.

The far away harsh sound of the flutes now invades my ears, while I am weeping–my ears which have forgotten these sounds. The lament songs and the sad woman hired to lament, with her resounding chant, will press upon me.

The funeral procession now follows the river side, while the Tuscan Tiber brings forth a sad sound, amid the bushes where the thorn bush produces white ivyberries.

The evening star, red by the evening light has not taken you away from the bossom of your mother, while you were hesitating. The wedding boys did not sing wedding hymns, while they raised the torches.

After I have poured forth the bowls of milk I bury your soul in the mute grave and in despair I utter a last "farewell, farewell, Tryphaena".

The evening star softly blew a yellow radiance on the marble colums of the Hadrian palace. The ravens flew over the Pincio hill, in a herd which was fleeing.

While I have the feeling of gradually being taken away, and being dragged through the cosmos, unaware of my own silent heart. At the same moment the voice of your mother cries out for Philetus, in vain.
(Pascoli 1966: pp. 505-509 – Translation by Laes 2019: pp 352-353)

Appendix III

1. Barbie in the Nutcracker (2001)

2. Barbie as Rapunzel (2002)

3. Barbie of Swan Lake (2003)

4. Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper (2004)

5. Barbie: Fairytopia (2005)

6. Barbie and the Magic of Pegasus (2005)

7. Barbie Fairytopia: Mermaidia (2006)

8. The Barbie Diaries (2006)

9. Barbie in the 12 Dancing Princesses (2006)

10. Barbie Fairytopia: Magic of the Rainbow (2007)

11. Barbie as the Island Princess (2007)

12. Barbie: Mariposa (2008)

13. Barbie & the Diamond Castle (2008)

14. Barbie in A Christmas Carol (2008)

15. Barbie Presents: Thumbelina (2009)

16. Barbie and the Three Musketeers (2009)

17. Barbie in A Mermaid Tale (2010)

18. Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale (2010)

19. Barbie: A Fairy Secret (2011)

20. Barbie: Princess Charm School (2011)

21. Barbie: A Perfect Christmas (2011)

22. Barbie in A Mermaid Tale 2 (2012)

23. Barbie: The Princess & the Popstar (2012)

24. Barbie in the Pink Shoes (2013)

25. Barbie: Mariposa & the Fairy Princess (2013)

26. Barbie & Her Sisters in A Pony Tale (2013)

27. Barbie: The Pearl Princess (2014)

28. Barbie and the Secret Door (2014)

29. Barbie in Princess Power (2015)

30. Barbie in Rock 'N Royals (2015)

31. Barbie & Her Sisters in The Great Puppy Adventure   (2015)

32. Barbie: Spy Squad (2016)

33. Barbie: Star Light Adventure (2016)

34. Barbie & Her Sisters in A Puppy Chase (2016)

35. Barbie: Video Game Hero (2017)

36. Barbie: Dolphin Magic (2017)

37. Barbie: Princess Adventure (2020)

38. Barbie & Chelsea: The Lost Birthday (2021)

39. Barbie: Big City, Big Dreams (2021)

40. Barbie: Mermaid Power (2022)

41. Barbie: Epic Road Trip (2022)

42. Barbie: Skipper and the Big Babysitting Adventure (2023)

43. Barbie (2023)

44. Barbie and Stacy to the Rescue (2024)

Appendix IV

Jobs from a child's perspective. Gender studies in social robotic and use of technologies, why is it important to expose children to such topics?

During this PhD program I had the chance to research for a period of time into the topic of Social Robotics, while focusing in particular on gender studies and the use of said robots with children. During my 2nd year of PhD, I spent 4 months in the United Kingdom, at the University of Hertfordshire with an equip of scholars, researchers and PhD students run by professor Farshid Amirabdollahian[40]. The University of Hertfordshire owns numerous social robots (with some of these being Pepper robot, Care-o-bot, Fetch Mobile Manipulator, Sawyer, and Miro-E[41]) which are all available in a space inside the university's structure called Robot House (run by researcher Patrick Holthaus[42]).

While there, I had the chance to observe in particular the Kaspar robot, which was invented and structured at UH:

> The Kaspar robot has been used to work with children with autism to help break their social isolation by acting as a social mediator with great success. A skill that children with ASD often struggle with is visual perspective taking (VPT), which is the ability to see the world from another person's view-point, making use of both spatial and social information. (Arujo et al. 2023: 2)

I was fortunate enough to be part of three different experiments with this robot: Kaspar Explains, Kaspar for Speech and Language and the project EMBOA (which was already finishing, although I could assist to a few session of the project in schools with children).

Social robotic has been studied in the latest years in many multi-faceted ways, since it can be helpful, as we already stated, for example, in studying the autism condition (or other conditions). However, social robots have been used also in gender studies. The use of social

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[40] Professor Farshid Amirabdollahian is a professor of Human-Robot interaction within the School of Physics, Engineering and Computer Science, and is the Principal Investigator at the University's 'Robot House' facility. He teaches Robotics and AI to undergraduate students. (source: https://www.herts.ac.uk/research/ai-and-robotics/prof-farshid-amirabdollahian)

[41] Robot House UH (University of Hertfordshire) source: https://robothouse.herts.ac.uk/robots/

[42] Dr Patrick Holthaus is a Senior Research Fellow in the Robotics Research Group at the University of Hertfordshire (UK). His research revolves around social robotics and focuses on nonverbal interactive signals, social credibility and trust in assistive and companion robots. (source: https://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/en/persons/patrick-holthaus)

robots in this case is usually double, gender-studies can be done with adults or with children and they can be about the perception of social robots when they're given a gender (an example of a study about this is 2019 *Gender Effects in Perceptions of Robots and Humans with Varying Emotional Intelligence* by Chita-Tegmark et al.) or about the use of social robots and new technologies with children. Scholars from all around the world researched on both these topics and what came out of several studies is a great disparity in gender. In particular when studying children perception and use of technologies «[…] gender is especially important given the evidence of existence of a gender gap in computer use in recent literature» (Cheema 2015: 1).

Other scholars who spoke about this gender gap also regarding children are Mubina Hassanali Kirmani, Marcia H. Davis, and Maya Kalyanpur in their 2009 article *Young Children Surfing: Gender Differences in Computer Use*. In this research they point out not only the role of female characters in videogames, which were often helpless and submitted to male characters, in particular when videogames were born (they quote as an example the Super Mario franchise with the character of Princess Peach), but also the differences of use of technologies that children have starting from the early years.

> […] girls more frequently valued choices within art or graphics application programs that allowed use of color, shapes, symbols, clip art, and animated sequences to share their stories or express knowledge. Children also vary by gender in the types of information they seek on the Internet. (Kirmani et al. 2009: 19)

Kirmani, Kalyanpur and Davis here are specifically speaking about a few studies by other scholars, in particular Hanor's preschool study made in 1998 (*Concepts and strategies learned from girls' interactions with computers*) and Kirmani & Davis' study made in 2000 (*Exploring young children's Web surfing and drawings on the computer*. Unpublished raw data). Their idea to reduce this gender gap is to use three strategies: Recognize Gender- Sensitive Learning Styles, Enhance Female Role Models and Select Suitable Software and Online Activities.

Although it is not possible to describe everything that gender-studies analyse in these technological fields, as Kirmani and her colleagues stated, it is crucial to have good role models also in fields that historically were more male-based and jobs that started being accessible for women only in the latest century. For this reason, in chapter 3 we spoke of Barbie also as a role model. Although ethically her creation and her shape has not always been inclusive or diverse, the idea of the doll is exactly what these scholars are proposing in this article. It gives young

children the vision that no matter your gender, you can be anything when you grow up (Gerber, 2009).

Appendix V

Walt Disney Animation Studios Films	Release year
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	1937
Pinocchio	1940
Fantasia	1940
Dumbo	1941
Bambi	1942
Saludos amigos	1942
The Three Caballeros	1943
Make Mine Music	1946
Fun & Fancy Free	1947
Melody Time	1948
The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr Toad	1949
Cinderella	1950
Alice in Wonderland	1951
Peter Pan	1953
Lady and the Tramp	1955
Sleeping Beauty	1959
One Hundred and One Dalmatians	1961
The Sword in the Stone	1963
The Jungle Book	1967
The Aristocats	1970
Robin Hood	1973
The many adventures of Winnie the Pooh	1977
The Rescuers	1977
The Fox and the Hound	1981
The Black Cauldron	1985
The Great Mouse Detective	1986
Oliver & Company	1988
The Little Mermaid	1989

The Rescuers Down Under	1990
Beauty and the Beast	1991
Aladdin	1992
The Lion King	1994
Pocahontas	1995
The Hunchback of Notre Dame	1996
Hercules	1997
Mulan	1998
Tarzan	1999
Fantasia 2000	2000
Dinosaur	2000
The Emperor's New Groove	2000
Atlantis: The Lost Empire	2001
Lilo & Stitch	2002
Treasure Planet	2002
Brother Bear	2003
Home on the Range	2004
Chicken Little	2005
Meet the Robinsons	2007
Bolt	2008
The Princess and the Frog	2009
Tangled	2010
Winnie the Pooh	2011
Wreck-it Ralph	2012
Frozen	2013
Big Hero 6	2014
Zootopia	2016
Moana	2016
Ralph Breaks the Internet	2018
Frozen II	2019
Raya and the Last Dragon	2021

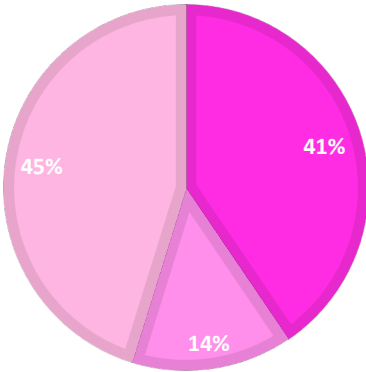|	
Encanto	2021
Strange World	2022
Wish	2023

Graphic I

BARBIE'S NAME IN THE ANIMATED FILMS

■ Barbie is the protagonist as herself - 41%

■ Barbie is herself and tells a story where she stars as a character - 14%

■ Barbie stars as another character (never named Barbie) - 45%

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