

Special Issue Intersectionality

# FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,  
Tourism, Technology

*Guest Editors*

**Mariella Nocenzi**

*Università degli Studi di Roma "Sapienza"*

**Silvia Fornari**

*Università degli Studi di Perugia*



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Editorial manager: Carmine Urcioli

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## Summary

### 9. Editorial

Intersectionality as Militant Concept

Fabio Corbisiero

### 11. Intersectionality and Sociology:

Theories and Methodologies Applied to Studies of Gender and Sexuality in Italy. Dilemmas and Perspectives

Silvia Fornari, Mariella Nocenzi

### 25. Mapping safety through an intersectional perspective. The case of Wher

Alina Dambrosio Clementelli

### 37. Symbolic Violence against Women as a Social and Cultural System

Milena Gammaitoni

### 51. Childlessness and disability:

an intersectional analysis on access to motherhood for women with disabilities in Italy

Ester Micalizzi

### 63. Intersecting injustices:

understanding oppression and privilege through the perspectives of parents facing poverty

Mara Sanfelici

### 75. Intersectional approach within Italian anti-violence centres. Challenges for research and policies

Angela Maria Toffanin

### 89. Gender and Age. The Myth of Eternal Youth in Advertising

Maria Fobert Veutro

## 3T SECTION - 3T READINGS

107. Hill Collins, P. (2022). *Intersezionalità come teoria critica della società*. Milano: UTET Università

F. Corbisiero e M. Nocenzi (a cura), pref. di K. Davis e V. Gheno, tr. it. P. Maturi

109. *Come si studiano le mafie? Roma: Donzelli*

Ingrasci, O., Massari, M. (2023)

111. *Nuvolati, G. (a cura di) (2019) Enciclopedia sociologica dei luoghi, Milano: Ledizioni*

113. Intervista a Patricia Hill Collins

Silvia Fornari, Mariella Nocenzi



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Milena Gammaitoni<sup>1</sup>

## Symbolic Violence against Women as a Social and Cultural System<sup>2</sup>

Portrait of a woman

She must be a variety.  
Change so that nothing will change.  
It's easy, impossible, tough going, worth a shot.  
Her eyes are, as required, deep, blue, gray,  
dark merry, full of pointless tears.  
She sleeps with him as if she's first in line or the only one on earth.  
She'll bear him four children, no children, one.  
Naive, but gives the best advice.  
Weak, but takes on anything.  
A screw loose and tough as nails.  
Curls up with Jasper or Ladies' Home Journal.  
Can't figure out this bolt and builds a bridge.  
Young, young as ever, still looking young.  
Holds in her hand a baby sparrow with a broken wing,  
her own money for some trip far away,  
a meat cleaver, a compress, a glass of vodka.  
Where's she running, isn't she exhausted.  
Not a bit, a little, to death, it doesn't matter.  
She must love him, or she's just plain stubborn.  
For better, for worse, for heaven's sake<sup>3</sup>.  
by Wislawa Szymborska

### Premise

By symbolic violence as a socio-cultural system we mean not only the total<sup>4</sup> social control exerted over the daily lives of women that has pervaded centuries of universal history (with some rare exceptions), but also those subtle forms of violence that legitimized a cultural mindset, which, between the 18th and 19th centuries - fostered by the establishment of encyclopedism and the creation of different specialistic disciplines - not only brought manuals of *bon ton* to set down in writing the roles and status of women but actually excluded them from the history of science, culture and the arts. Both kinds of symbolic violence, social and cultural, are present, even today, in different forms and dynamics, though it is the second type that prevails.

Some very simple bibliographic research permits us to rediscover the intellectual and creative works of women, but before investigating them, we need to overcome a twofold prejudice: if women are not mentioned in reference books it must be because they were unable to produce anything; if and when we discover their productions, we may be led to believe that their exclusion is due to the fact that they were not brilliant enough to be remembered and handed down to posterity.

The exclusion and/or underestimation of the genius and value of women have strongly influenced the construction of the identity of women and men. From their earliest school years, when they enter the world of knowledge, they are not only convinced that their historical iden-

1 Milena Gammaitoni, Università Roma Tre, milena.gammaitoni@uniroma3.it, ORCID: 000-0002-6578-8199.

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3 Translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (<https://margot-krebs-neale.co.uk/por-trait-woman-wislawa-szymborska/>)

4 Until the 1970s, women could not go out alone, etc. The rare exceptions regard some famous women who achieved greater freedom of movement, like Hildegard von Bingen in the Middle Ages who had the Pope's permission to preach in public, an activity forbidden to women, and travel alone through territories outside of the Monastery. Even today a woman who walks alone down a street may feel she is prey to attention that can be very intrusive, at times aggressive, and even violent. During research carried out in 2020, 77% of the 1057 women and girls interviewed stated being harassed on the streets. See *Lo street harassment e la costruzione sociale dei corpi. Dominio e pratiche di resistenza nello spazio urbano*, a Ph.D. dissertation by Greta Calabresi.

tity owes nothing to what has been sedimented by the presence of women but also fail to comprehend the fact that the legitimization of the absence of the feminine and the lack of historical-social awareness it generates, is unable to counteract male violence and femicide. Today, in Italy one woman is killed every 3 days while, worldwide one woman is murdered every twelve minutes. *Proximity violence*, the prime cause of femicides (Bartholini, 2017)<sup>5</sup> is simply the product of cultural and family models according to which women, not being the protagonists of grand-scale history have no right to self-determination.

As intellectuals and university teachers, it is our task to help fill this historiographical void and honour our mandate to educate the new generations while also providing adults with lifelong education. The Rape of the Sabines cannot be narrated as a simple episode in the history of ancient Rome. We are duty-bound to explain clearly that it involved the kidnapping and rape of young women, forced into marriage for the sake of demographic expansion.



The Rape of the Sabine Women by Nicolas Pussin (1634-5), da Wikipedia

Although artistic representations are often inspired by a legend, we are all aware of how powerful the mythological imaginary of human history is, starting from Zeus who, availing himself of his power as supreme God, kidnapped and had his way with the goddesses and women he desired. Turning himself into a white bull to deceive her, he made the young Europa his own. In mythical narratives, sexualized violence or non-consensual impregnation led, not only to the birth of new gods or heroes, but also to the foundation of new institutions: for example, the goddess Athena was born from Zeus' rape of Metis (devoured pregnant by the god who feared being dethroned if she bore a male child. Instead, the foetus survived and Athena, the founder of Athens and the emblem of strength and virtue, was born from her father's skull.

The god Hephaestus helps Zeus give birth to the goddess Athen Likewise, Romulus and Remus, the twin founders of Rome, were the outcome of Mars' rape of Rea Silvia., a descendant of Aeneas. The myth of the raping, inseminating god legitimized the authoritarian and violent power men were to wield over women, giving rise to the long history of patriarchy that accustomed women to believe they were destined to play roles of inferiority and fragility and find themselves, most probably, at the eternal mercy of male violence. Today, this dynamic is called the "culture of rape" (definition inspired by the 1975 documentary of the same name) according to which men and women were expected to take for granted that sexual violence was an inevitable fact of life, so much so, that a video game *Rape Day* (fortunately suspended after three weeks) was produced. *Stuprum*, the Latin for rape, means shame, ignominy, dishonour of the victim, not of her assailant, however.

<sup>5</sup> In 62.7% of all cases rape is perpetrated by the victim's companion while 70% of femicides are committed by a partner. In 2017, in Italy, 4,520,000 women between the ages of 16 and 70 experienced sexual violence (source Istat).

Very recently, we have witnessed the violent reaction of the most reactionary and paternalistic sectors of Italian public opinion when the famous Treccani<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia decided to define social roles in terms of the feminine as well as masculine gender<sup>7</sup>. A right-wing newspaper went so far as to publish an article against this important and long-needed cultural change, with an article entitled: «Turn around at the Treccani Institute. The Three Bitches have arrived ... Feminist dictionary» (Sallusti, *Libero*, the 12th of September 2022).

## 2. Institutionalised symbolic violence

We live immersed in a world of social and public communications that sum up symbolic violence very efficaciously: from the streets of our cities to advertising, to the social media<sup>8</sup>. We are constantly surrounded by images and definitions of female roles, from traditional stereotypes, still noticeably present in the majority of children's fairy tales and many best sellers (a topic we shall deal with in the third section) to actual violent aggression in the social media, especially when famous women speak their minds and express their opinions (as in the cases of Michela Murgia and Liliana Segre, for example).

As regards the sphere of advertising it is emblematic that only a few years ago, Prada invested in a publicity campaign containing an allusion to a probable sex orgy, where even the hypothesis of rape did not seem to intimidate the model, who, on the contrary, wore a seductive expression. The advert was visible everywhere, from magazines to large-scale billboards. Despite this, very few people expressed alarm at the content of the message conveyed. Graziella Priulla has been denouncing this kind of symbolic violence for many years now. «In 8 months, there were more than a million tweets against women, an increase of 1.7% compared to the same period of 2018. In about 72% of the cases we speak of, women were dealt with on Twitter in negative terms» (Priulla, 2020, p. 21).

Now let us turn to the streets we pass through daily here in Italy. *L'Associazione Toponomastica Femminile*, the Italian Female Toponymy Association, has surveyed the maps of the whole of the country and noted that only 5% of all streets and squares are dedicated to women, while 40% are named after men. Let us now bear in on Rome where only 659 of its 16,079 streets and squares are named after women and many of those that are, are frequently located in peripheral areas. Of these 56 recall the Madonna, 89 female saints and martyrs, 25 nuns, 29 benefactresses, 92 women of letters, 17 female scientists, 75 women from the world of show business, 245 businesswomen, 135 female historical figures, 77 mythological/ legendary figures, 2 female athletes, 5 entrepreneurs, while 33 are associated with local customs and traditions (like *via delle Convertite*<sup>9</sup> or *via delle Zoccolette*<sup>10</sup>).

Living in places that are declined, above all, in terms of the masculine gender, has contributed to the construction of a collective reality and identity that has concealed and passivized feminine action and the history of women. This simple everyday phenomenon is akin to and features as an ancillary aspect of the symbolic violence that has expunged the works of women from every

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6 The word "Treccani" translates literally as "Three(male)dogs".

7 Unlike English, Italian substantives are either masculine or feminine in gender. Human beings and their activities are also indicated in the masculine or feminine form, while in English they often belong to the common gender category: child *bambino/bambina*, friend *amico/amica*, professor *professore/professoressa* etc.

8 In Europe one woman out of 10, aged over 15 has been the object of cyber violence. There is a galaxy of groups, forums, sites and chat platforms that foster and fuel contempt for the female gender. They exist above all on Telegram chat sites dedicated to the culture of rape, like *Cagnette* (literally "little bitches"), which invites women to send hot photos of their female friends.

9 Literally The Street of the Female Converts, the name refers to prostitutes converted by the church in the XVIII century; for a detailed account see <https://www.romeandart.eu/it/arte-convertite.html>

10 Literally the Street of the Little Clogs. In the Roman dialect «zoccolette» means «whores», although the original reference was to the clogs worn by the female orphans hosted by an institution on that street.

area of culture and excluded them from the textbooks of the various disciplines. As this systemic social denial of the feminine has a strong impact at an unconscious level and undermines it, it is necessary to reconstruct the history of society and surpass the twofold prejudice mentioned above in the premise.

Renzo Paternoster defines this process as a cultural disorder «which has institutionalized a biological difference making it a cultural one; it is a dysfunction of knowledge caused by a poor knowledge of things, which provokes a significant ailment that affects the relational and affective sphere of a person, leading, in turn, to a dangerous form of a-sociality and inhumanity» (p. 223). Mary Wollstonecraft, whom we may rightfully consider a pre-sociologist, is the woman, who in the 1700s, helped clarify and criticise the social dynamics that influenced the education of the men and women of her day. She wrote that the female body as portrayed in the iconography of the time was simply a fragile, helpless, decorative, sickly body because women were prevented, effectively, from developing physical strength: they were not allowed to run in the garden or do gymnastics, much less exercise their minds in rational thought. It is, therefore, evident that not only the pictorial and plastic arts, but also literature and music merely reflected their frailty.

«Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.»(...) "To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say, that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the MODEST slaves of opinion». (WOLLSTONECRAFT 2010, pp. 57.58)

Today, Eva Cantarella<sup>11</sup> writes that knowledge of that past obliges us to ask how and why, after centuries and in profoundly different contexts, age-old aspects of the rapport between the sexes continue to resurface, often in the guise of modernity and transmitted by the media that implicitly and subtly propose them as models.

In the narrative of history women appear and disappear: they materialise in monographs and non-fiction but vanish from the textbooks used to present the new generations with universal knowledge. This phenomenon characterizes the history of ideas (philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology a little less so), despite the magnitude of contemporary international and national monographic production, and of material regarding the history of the arts (literature, theatre, music, painting, architecture, sculpture). If, for example, Caterina Percoto and Sibilla Al-eramo feature at times in some anthologies of Italian literature, in the manuals of the history of Italian music there is no trace of the female musicians or composers who are extensively dealt with in dictionaries and anthologies of other Western countries. The New Grove of Music mentions 900 women musicians, the Oxford Library 1500.

In the 1980s, Joanna Russ, a science-fiction writer, published a sociological essay, *How to suppress women's writing*, explaining how the writing of women might be stifled. She examined the social dynamics by means of which female writers either remained outside of history, due to denial of agency or were falsely recategorized, therefore, downgraded, excluded from the canon which failed not only to create new criteria capable of mainstreaming them but, at times, actually tarred them with the stigmatizing brush of deviance.

A lack of awareness of their historical-social origins, Russ held, weakened human beings required to address their future and structure their own personalities. She wrote that women had first been described, then narrated long before they were allowed to speak for themselves. She posited that, at times, only literary images seemed to enjoy greater depth, because women, over the centuries, had been confined to the silence of reproduction, appearing as shadows in history, experiencing art within the intimacy of convents, cowed within their homes, creating an art that was not worth passing on<sup>12</sup>.

11 Cfr. Op. cit., pag. 10.

12 G. Duby, M. Perrot, *Storia delle donne, L'Antichità*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1990, p. V

Yet behavioural models and values are transmitted by women (nurses, tutors, mothers, teachers). It is they who perform the institutional role of the socialization of children in all cultures and sub-cultures (for example, in the mafia subculture it is the wife and mother who legitimizes disvalues, revenge, and the defence of the honour of men).

It is interesting and significant to note that Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music and the symbol of one of the world's most prestigious conservatories of music, was never a musician. She was a Roman patrician who wished to consecrate herself to Christ and preserve her virginity, so much so, that she converted her husband to Christianity and chastity, a decision which caused both of them to be sentenced to death. Later Cecilia was canonized and portrayed with a musical instrument in her arms.

Female artists have been the object of censorship, prejudice, to ghettoizing and marginalizing stereotypes, so much so, that they have undergone the stigma of double deviance: that of being women rebelling against the customs of their times (tarred as mad or nymphomaniacs) and that of being artists, that is, traditionally deviant individuals, extravagant at best.

It may surprise you to discover that most female musicians were born into artistic and/or socially elitist families and usually led a fairly traditional private life. They married and, while studying and creating their musical works, they became mothers, opened schools, taught in conservatories and financed the staging of their own musical works.

While in the West die-hard stereotypes continue to survive (see Gammaitoni, 2021, on issues of language and female orchestral conductors), in the Middle East some female musicians emerge to rebel against religious and political domination. Exemplary is the story of Negin Kholwakh, the first Afghan female conductor of an orchestra of which we have information thanks to the mass media and social networks. The twenty-year-old Negin refuses to wear a veil and rebels against the power of the Taliban which has prevented her from studying music. Her protest is so powerful that during one of her concerts a suicide bomber blew himself up in the audience.

These days we witness the rebellion of Iranian men and women following the killing of a young Kurdish woman who failed to cover all her hair with a veil. After her, the police killed and are killing other demonstrators while 90 women are missing.

Social justice needs, therefore, to be redefined, re-imagined and shared, using new narratives and reconstructing our symbolic universes.

It seems to be no coincidence, that, for example, the foremost sociologists of 20th-century art are women: Vera Zolberg, Janet Wolff and Nathalie Heinich, for example, who strive to overcome normative positions and move in a direction closer to anthropology and pragmatics, approaches no longer aimed solely at the explanation of objects and facts, but open to an understanding of representation.

However, it is necessary to retrace the construction and deconstruction of the feminine starting from ancient times, because it is from there that we come. All over the world there exist images of dismembered goddesses, in India, for example, in Mexico, and among the Sumerians. Their destruction and disappearance represent their removal from the world that had formerly revolved around them. The act of dismemberment is always attributed to a male god who, in all of the cultures in question, usurps the position previously occupied by the goddess. In India, Indra killed the goddess and dispersed the mutilated parts of her body all over the countryside. The places where the dismembered fragments of the goddess's body fell became sanctuaries where she is still worshiped today. In Babylon, the hero Gilgamesh killed the dark goddess Tiamat and scattered her limbs so that he might create a new world. In Mexico, the war god Huitzilopochtli killed his sister, the moon goddess Coyolxauqui, and threw her devastated body from the top of a mountain to prove that he had routed her. Too often our textbooks overlook the extermination of nine million witches<sup>13</sup>, traditional healers, during the four centuries of witch-hunting that preceded the Enlightenment. This omission has contributed to the creation of a collective and

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13 The term witch or sorceress stems from a root meaning sacred woman or sacred grove.

individual form of amnesia, affecting the social-cultural conscience or unconscious, obliged to sit up and take notice due to the femicides that take place every day all over the world.

Dirdin Robertson (1974) claims that the word *Charis* was originally the name of a goddess. It meant Grace and derived from the term used to indicate menstrual blood, though, later, it became the root of the term Eucharist with which it shares its etymology and semantic assonance. By way of antithesis and paradox, in Western civilization, for ten centuries menstruating women were forbidden to go to church. How can a woman grow up in a society that fears one of her natural biological functions without having the feeling that she conceals some grave inner culpability? In ancient times that very same blood was used to fertilize the soil and was celebrated by communities who followed the cycles of the moon. It acted as an intermediary aspect of the spiritual bond within a community, to be replaced later by the circumcision of newborns.

In ancient times too, menopausal women were considered the wise grandmothers of the tribe, and the magical blood accumulated in their bodies was deemed analogous to the wisdom contained in their psyches. On the contrary, today, women seem merely to wear themselves out, and be treated as empty disposable containers.

The same degree of sacred power was attributed to the Great Goddess of ancient Europe studied by the archaeo-mythologist<sup>14</sup> Maria Gimbutas. This Goddess is represented in carvings, symbols and images, primary sources essential to an understanding of Western religion, mythology and archeo-mythology, useful to obtain a view of the Pre-Indo-European world. Several studies regarding continuous associations between the Middle East, south-eastern Europe, areas of the Mediterranean and of central, western and northern Europe, reveal the spread of the cult of this very same Goddess. Many of them<sup>15</sup> claim that the womb of the Grand Mother was believed to have bestowed life on all things:

«Of the beliefs shared by ancient agricultural populations, those regarding sterility and fertility, the fragility of life and the constant threat of destruction, as well as the periodic need to renew the generative processes of nature, are the most enduring. Some very archaic aspects of the prehistoric Goddess continue to live even today despite the continuous process of erosion that affected them upon entry into the era of history. Transmitted by the grandmothers and mothers of the European family, several of the ancient beliefs survived despite overexposure to Indo-European and, later, to Christian myths. Religion centred on the Goddess existed for a very long time, well before the era of Indo-European and Christian culture (which represents a relatively short period of human history) and left an indelible mark on the Western psyche (...).» (Gimbutas, 2008; p. XII)

The main symbolic theme of the Goddess is the mystery of birth, death and regeneration, not only of human life but also of all forms of life on earth and even those within the cosmos. Symbols and images coalesce around the parthenogenetic Goddess and her functions as Giver of Life, Ruler of Death and - no less important - Regenerator. She is simultaneously young and old, she rises and wanes to the rhythm of the lives of the plants (Gimbutas, 2008, p. 20). With its total absence of images of war or solitary individuals, the art representing the Goddess seems to reflect a social order where women were leaders of the community and priestesses<sup>16</sup>.

In the Bible, too, women are present, with strong and sometimes ambiguous roles, to the point of becoming shadows, just as many of the women of the New Testament have a multi-faceted destiny. Emblematic among all the stories of these women, and there are many of them in Scripture, is that of Zipporah, the Ethiopian wife of Moses, his faithful companion and saviour, who

14 The union of archeology, comparative mythology, historical sources, linguistics, folklore, historical ethnography.

15 See in particular Gimbutas M. (1989); Noble V. (1991); Duby M., Perrott G., (1990); Zucca M., (2010); Bock G., (2001) Scaraffia L., (2013 e 2016), Murgja M., (2011), Irigaray L. (2010).

16 Maria Gimbutas points out that in the fifth millennium BC a completely different Neolithic culture "with tamed horses and lethal weapons emerged within the basin of the river Volga " from southern Russia to the western bank of the Black Sea. This new population changed the course of European prehistory. "I call it the *Kurgan* culture (*kurgan* means mound in Russian), because the dead were buried under circular mounds covering the burial places of prominent males." (Gimbutas, 1989; pp. XX-XXI)

knows how to advise him during his dangerous encounter with God, to become the protagonist of the event:

«Zipporah circumcised her son and with the excised fragment of his foreskin touched her husband's genitals, uttering solemn words that sound almost like a warning against that disconcerting God, 'Surely you are a husband of blood to me!' They are the only words spoken directly by Zipporah. They have the flavour of a liturgical formula that seems to seek to establish membership, 'Take your claws off this man because he is mine!' The outcome of the gesture is appeasement of the anger of the divinity. The life of Moses is saved» (Maggi, 2009; p. 42).

Zipporah was the daughter of a priest, and shows that she too is a priestess by performing a ritual capable of saving her husband. But after this episode, she becomes a shadow, a fleeting trace until she disappears from the life of Moses, who remarries, this time choosing a younger woman. Is one possible interpretation of what we are told about the life of Zipporah a warning not to separate projects from affection, salvation from communion?

The woman presented in the book of Proverbs is not praised for her beauty. What matters is the strength, autonomy and wisdom of her words. Scripture provides us with an alternative view, in some ways revolutionary, as Walter Benjamin wrote, "the revolution is the leap of a tiger in the past".<sup>17</sup>

This is what Mary Wollstonecraft in England and Olympe de Gouges in France tried to assert during the heyday of the Enlightenment when fighting for a form of education for women not confined to the sphere of feelings, but enlarged to embrace rationality. They held that the inferior social condition of women was not a matter of nature, but a reality dictated by culture and education.

Mary Wollstonecraft, in particular, should enter history as a full-blown forerunner of sociology, like her contemporary J-J Rousseau, because, first of all, in the 1700s she clarified and criticised the social dynamics that influenced the lack of an egalitarian form of education for both men and women alike and the exclusion of women from the exercise of rational thought and freedom of action in space and in their own time. The two books read most frequently by young girls in Wollstonecraft's day were Fordyce's *Sermons* and Dr. Gregory's *Legacy to his Daughters*. History, philosophy, the classical languages were considered too difficult for girls, while botany and biology were forbidden because deemed coarse. Apart from dance and exercises in posture, young women made no physical effort, engaged in no contests and practised no outdoor games but were

«Confined then in cages like the feathered race they have nothing to do but to plume themselves and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch». (Wollstonecraft, 1792; p. 64)

Wollstonecraft was interested, above all, in investigating the origin and dynamics of the inferior social condition imposed upon women. Before claiming legal and political rights she believed it was necessary to acknowledge the right of women to a childhood during which the body and mind were trained to be strong and not at the mercy of fragility and compliance:

«[...] But were their understanding once emancipated from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short-sighted desire, like that of dominion in tyrants, of present sway, has subjected

17 "The woman of Proverbs does not correspond certainly the one in the ancient Venetian saying, "Let her please, be silent, stay at home". She has a strong, enterprising character. She provides for the needs of the family not only the management of the home, but by undertaking commercial activities. The hymn taken into consideration talks about prices, earnings, buying and selling, estimating merchandise, production: " She looks at a field and buys it, plants a vineyard, trades with the fruit of her hands". This woman has contacts with merchants who travel to distant lands and open up new horizons for her. She sells them the goods she produces. Such a woman necessarily has a strong sense of autonomy, even if she belongs to a patriarchal environment. This is, naturally, an idealized image. However, contemporary readers will have to question themselves about present-day ideals, the images of women our emancipated reality suggests". Op. cit., p. 131.



them, we should probably read of their weaknesses with surprise. I must be allowed to pursue the argument a little farther.

It was true that women who gained power by devious means, practicing or favouring vice, evidently lost the place that reason should assign them and become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants.

The moment women acquired that kind of power, they lost all simplicity and mental dignity, and acted just like the men who had come to power by similar means.

The time had come for a revolution in women's behaviour. It was time to restore their lost dignity, and ensure that they, as part of the human species, worked to transform the world, starting with themselves.

To become respectable, it is necessary to exercise intelligence, an essential element of independence of character [...] and bow to the authority of reason only and cease to be the modest slaves of opinion».

(Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 47).

It is no coincidence that Catholic women have been the least emancipated in Western history and have struggled much harder than Protestants or Jews to achieve recognition of their civil and political rights. This difference is explained (Duby G., Perrot M.,; 1990) as the result of the dogmas of the Church, of its customs and, therefore, of how its doctrine is experienced. Protestantism and Judaism required their members to read and write as well as interpret the sacred scriptures, even autonomously and on their own behalf. Within Catholicism, the mediation of the priest is required to interpret sacred texts and for confession. These functions were traditionally central and were not entrusted to the autonomy of the individual especially not to women, who were permitted to learn to read, but not to write.

This is precisely the case of Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), who in her monastery learned to read but not to write: she dictated all her memoirs and knowledge to her secretary. Hildegard, a Benedictine nun, a mystic and prophetess, a cosmologist, herbalist and healer, linguist, naturalist, philosopher, musician and composer, asked for and obtained permission to found an all-female monastery and the possibility of playing, dancing, singing, creating miniatures and music in honour of God and life (Gammaitoni, 2013). She managed to achieve an unthinkable degree of freedom for a woman of the Middle Ages: she travelled throughout Germany as a prophetess, in a century when women could not travel easily, or were not allowed to speak publicly, on the eve of an era when many women would be condemned to be burnt at the stake for witchcraft.

Hildegard was respected and kings and queens sought her out for advice. She addressed the men and women of her time and preached publicly with all the prestige and austerity of a prophetess. She even went so far as to denounce the incapacity and/or indolence of ministers of the church. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI canonised her as Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Doctor of the Universal Church.

The genius of women was recently recognized and publicly re-evaluated by St. John Paul II in a prestigious document entitled *Primis Mulieris dignitatem*, which inaugurated a reflection on the "theology of women", something auspicated also by the present pope, Francis.

It was by no chance that Simone de Beauvoir (1961) wrote that the observation, the judgment of men, creates the private and social identity of women. Antonietta Potente (2015, pp. 13-14), a theologian and Dominican sister wrote of St. Thomas Aquinas:

«Starting from the end, for me, means finding myself with groups of women who were initiators of feminist thinking of ideas of difference, or who represent historical feminism and discover that we are all more or less the same age and that some younger ones walk restlessly, but on other paths. In short, starting from the end is a bit starting from that sense of no future that surrounds today, humanity and above all those small and large groups - even religious life, in fact - which in some way marked history or for the less they tried. (...)

For example, in the 1960s and 1970s religious life was entered to seek a more effective social commitment; one followed the historical Jesus, the Jesus of the relationship with the excluded. This was also the case for those who entered the seminary. The model was that of the Incarnation, of God-with-us, Emmanuel. Today this model dream seems insufficient and not only for those who choose these horizons but also for those looking for a space in history».

### 3. Symbolic violence in contemporary literature

The latest provision of the Italian Ministry of Education (January 2020) provides that to pass the competition permitting one to teach Italian in the country's senior secondary schools, it is sufficient to know two twentieth-century female authors. Two. When there are at least twenty of the highest level (Serkowska, 2017).

Unfortunately, very little has changed since in 1973 Elena Gianini Belotti in *Dalla parte delle bambine* [On the side of girls] wrote that "authors of children's books limit themselves to providing them with the same models as those proffered by the family and the social environment".

Despite the fact that in a self-regulation code, in 1999, ten of Italy's major publishing houses active in the school sector - De Agostini, Giunti, La Scuola, Nicola Milano, Fabbri, Raffaello, Piemme, Elmedi, Capitello, Piccoli - promised to avoid sexism and stereotypes and provide balanced representations of difference in the books they published between 1998 and 2002.

The first feature that one notices is the clear prevalence of male protagonists, 59.1% of the total (as many as 74% in a text published by Raffaello Scuola) as against 37% female protagonists. Taking adventure stories only into account, in 72% of all the cases examined, the protagonist is a male (Biemmi, 2017). The professions attributed to these male protagonists are 50 as against 15 assigned to the females. Among the former we find kings (5), knights (4), masters, magicians, squires, writers, doctors and poets, while the women, in 8 cases, are all teachers. The other female characters are witches or sorceresses.

Examining the secondary characters, we find the same degree of asymmetry: 80 male professions - knights and kings, but also captains, soldiers, pirates, merchants, monks, hunters, janitors, sailors, painters, firemen, mayors, journalists, engineers, geologists, commanders, even a lion tamer and a pope.

The professions involving women are 23 in all, though teachers head the list, followed by witches. Then there are waitresses, doctors, painters, needlewomen, secretaries, managers, dancers, TV news readers, gardeners, housekeepers and beauticians.

This way, by providing them with a broad range of choices and particularly rewarding models, young boy readers are encouraged to "aim high". The exact opposite is true in the case of girls, because if most of the professions (and in particular the most prestigious and attractive ones) are attributed to the male gender, it is highly unlikely that a girl will aspire to a profession in one of those fields.

Dacia Maraini also draws our attention to the fact that however heavy housework may be, it is never remunerated. This means that, as a result, children often consider unpaid domestic work the biological duty of the woman-mother-wife while men are defined more often than women by their professions. Today, women continue to be defined on the basis of their parental role. In the books examined here only 12.3% of the male characters are referred to as fathers (though they are also defined on the basis of their professions) 24.4% of the female characters are just said to be mothers. And "this being a mother is understood in the most traditional sense: cooking, cleaning the house, preparing a snack for the children to take to school". As for the children who feature in the texts, the boys play with tanks, rockets and robots and love cars, music, physics and mathematics, while the girls prefer dolls, admire nature, collect stamps and postcards and - as a pastime, of course - cook, clean and organise parties. However, there are also some signs of change, there are also girls who "construct a barometer", carry out scientific experiments or declare being interested in mathematics.

An analysis of the content of the individual texts highlights the fact that alongside the numerous gender stereotypes there are also several anti-stereotypes: equal and unconventional models, albeit in no way extraordinary. These present an intelligent, free, witty and self-confident woman, an adventurous and imaginative female child.

Anti-stereotypes that refer to the males are rarer and include the "fearful man" and the "shy, silent, delicate, calm little boy". This disparity of roles is also reflected in a research project con-

ducted in 2012 regarding the contents of the West's best sellers, where the principal and secondary characters are, more often than not, men, young, thin, not particularly glamorous though almost always white-skinned.

What are the reasons that prompt an author to devise a best seller, building certain male and female characters? Susanna Tamaro declared that she decided by default to write a best seller *Va dove ti porta il cuore* [Go where your heart takes you] where metalepsis (the technique by means of which the construction of the "real/fake author is transformed by fiction to trigger the empathy of the readers prepared to make the fiction they are reading real) provides an open door to millions of potential readers" (Calabrese, 2015, p. 36). This technique is so efficacious that readers become the co-authors of the concrete intention to cooperate in the writing of a series of novels by interacting with the male/female author at his/her website and on social media, giving rise to the spin-off genre where the destiny of the characters becomes so playfully important that possible developments and endings are proposed. This was not only the case with *Harry Potter* and his famous author J.K. Rowling, but also with undeniably autobiographical-educational novels like *The Kite Runner*. These are novels that became best sellers because everything was delocalized, the author-character had his/her body in one place, his/her mind in another, prepared to become flesh-and-blood male and female characters in films and TV series.

The twentieth century was characterized by the "historical dissolution of the unity of the subject", so much so, that in his *Teoria dell'Estetica* [The Theory of Aesthetics] Theodor Adorno denounced the incomplete nature of the modern novel, meaning that it is constantly in progress. In the West we are witnessing the loss of the narrating first-person voice, of introspection, the definition of an ethos and its dissolution. Today, the characters of many novels are afflicted by unavoidable fatigue, bewilderment, a sense of desolation and a quest for truth or knowledge. This means that one has the feeling that compared to other literary genres, the novel is unending, incomplete. This seems to be the reason why in the 21st century, despite the death of Stieg Larsson, his stories have been inherited by another author, who continues the story so that now a television series called *Millennium* thrives propelled by characters who now seem to have a life of their own.

The Latins designated the *persona* (from the Latin *per-sonar*, to sound through), and the character derived from it as an entity that resonated because closely linked to his/her theatrical role and the mask s/he represented, from which Erving Goffman derived the socio-institutional experience of the concept of role. In the arts, the Greek word protagonist (principal or first actor) is derived from this because in ancient classical times the lead actor was the person who performed the foremost dramatic role.

Today, can the same be said of the best-sellers written for the two generations of readers including young adults, children, adolescents, adults and the elderly? In any case, what are the characteristics that emerge from the personages of these latest best sellers? It is indicative that those who undertake an analysis of the 21st-century male and female characters featured in contemporary best-sellers are rare. Stefano Calabrese describes some of the types and recurrences on the basis of the "metacharacters" they feature: the *smart novel*, the *trans-novel*, the *immersive novel*, the *magical novel*, the *emotional novel*; definitions that are not closed in upon themselves but act as intercommunicating vessels where the watchword is always metalepsis.

In 2013, the journal *Science* published the results of some psychological research conducted by the New School for Research in New York confirming the intuitions that the economist Smith had already written about in the 19th century whereby "reading novels increases the levels of empathy between us and others, improves social perception and heightens emotional intelligence that is, the ability to understand what others feel by feeling it in turn. Readers create their own mental images of the emotions and feelings of literary characters, experiencing a personal, almost physical transport." (Calabrese, 2015, p.31)

In recent years, the production of novels has increased worldwide by 44%. Their high degree of readability facilitates their diffusion at medium-low, medium-high and high levels of society. There are those who hypothesise that in the face of economic crises or slowdowns of the global

economy, there is a need for literary fiction, evasion and identification of the problems characterizing the *liquid society* such as the loss of employment, the impoverishment of the family nucleus and emotional instability.

In the case of the best sellers chosen and analyzed between 1998 and 2012, using a specially devised content-analysis sheet, it emerged that they feature mainly ordinary, no longer exceptional people because "like the characters of literature they draw on reality, so that reality elevates some characters to the rank of witnesses of truth, reducing their proper names to common nouns" (Bufalino 1982, p.31). But they are extraordinary in their everyday lives, heroes and heroines practically by chance, intelligent enough, rarely brilliant. It seems that the task of these characters is, mainly, to reassure average people despite their human misery, rather than establish themselves as heroic examples of values and choices that they should and would never betray.

In honour of metalepsis, these male and female characters act in a present, time often contemporary to the era of the reader, or in the very recent past. Most of them live in the USA (31%), France (10%), the United Kingdom (10%), Italy (10%) and their stories take place more often than not inside the home and in urban contexts.

The protagonists are more frequently men (56%), young people (41%) rather than adults (36%). The majority of these young heroes and heroines are students, children (33%) and are single (49%), while only 15% cohabit or are married. They are described as being physically "normal" 38% of the time, thin 25% of the time, and fat only 5% of the time. However, they appear to possess no extraordinary abilities, on the contrary, they seem to be very ordinary (59%), undoubtedly fascinating in their own way (46%) while the majority of them are Caucasians (87%).

The co-protagonist is almost always a man (46%), an adult (47%), 58% of the time his status is mentioned explicitly. In 15% of cases he is a son, single 33% and married 23 % of the time. He is nearly always a student (10%) a domestic servant (8%) an artist (5%), a homemaker (5%), a policeman (5%), a scientist (5%). In 59% of all cases, he is described physically, is said to be normal 38% fat 13% and thin 8% of the time. He differs from the protagonist more due to his lack of charm than because of other traits; he is deemed handsome 38% of the time, though he is always said to be an ordinary person (56%), of Caucasian origin in 69%, Mongolian 8% of the time. On the contrary, the antagonist plays a different role; is a man in 51% of all the cases, a woman in 7% of the time. He is older than the protagonists and the co-protagonists (49%), married 28%, single only 8% of the time, more clearly defined and better structured than the other characters. He is a merchant 39%, an entrepreneur 8%, a professional or a policeman 5% of the time, undefined 13% of the time. In 46% of all the cases examined, he is described physically (normal 36%, fat 5%) held to be charming 18%, handsome 16% and ugly 13% of the time. He too is an ordinary person 41%, extraordinary only 20% of the time. He is of Caucasian origin 51%, of African origin only 5% of the time.

The protagonists, both men and women, perform a dominant role in the story (50%), though the men appear more independent (45%) than the women.

The men identify as single (90.5%) more often than the women (86%).

The male antagonists are dominant in 63.6% and independent 18.2% in all cases. The women are dominant only 13% of the time.

The true phenomenon of the twentieth century was the success with the public and critics of female writers born in the 1960s. On the one hand, they rejected all interest in current politics and in the literary tradition, privileged a dreamlike, fantastic world, and addressed the taboos of sex (e.g. Yoshimoto) and the female body. On the other hand, the female writers who established feminist politics were completely absent from the upper ranks of best-seller ratings (Serkowska, 2020).

Only in rare cases did some female roles associated with apparently submissive, passive action emerge in a way that, not being immediately evident, was subtle or unconscious, began to establish themselves as astute co-protagonists or antagonists. Excellent exceptions are the protagonists of *The Help*, *Va dove ti porta il cuore* [Go where your heart takes you] and *L'Élegance du hérisson* [The Elegance of the Hedgehog].

## Conclusions

«We are the daughters of a truly long history with its standard of countless precautionary strategies: borders, prohibitions, limitations, exclusions, interdictions, denials, mortifications, repressions, constraints, suspicions, prescriptions, expropriations, all justified by the *natural* female vulnerability, implicit in the strong/weak, active/passive dichotomy» (Priulla, 2020, p. 97). Today, we continue to be faced with difficulties when they are called upon to discern the violence experienced by women. The issue of rape has travelled down the long corridors of legal rules and interpretations, where it is easy to come across judgments that blame the victims for patterns of behaviour that allegedly facilitated the acts of violence perpetrated against them, to the point of questioning the veracity of their accusations. This permits us to conjecture, therefore, how difficult it is to recognize symbolic violence in the history of ideas and the arts.

It is the same kind of violence that diminishes, by subtraction, the problem of human trafficking, of new types of slavery that assume the form of forced prostitution, because, it is held, after all, prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, so much so, that occasionally we hear talk of reopening brothels to safeguard urban decor. Out of sight, out of mind!

Here we wish to recall the words of the British orchestral conductor Sir Thomas Beecham who held that "The trouble with women in an orchestra is that if they're attractive it will upset my players and if they're not it will upset me." (Atkins, Newman, 1978).

Another type of symbolic violence: the "cancellation" of women as they age. In 2012, the German orchestral conductor Elke Mascha Blankenburg wrote, "to date we find no woman conductor over 55 years of age with a permanent contract"<sup>18</sup>. Older female conductors are not sought after anywhere; they manage to impose themselves only if they are young and beautiful. "Maturity of interpretation, knowledge of musical practice, an expert ear count for nothing. Instead, the public listens ardently to concerts conducted by gentlemen aged 70, 80, 90. At present, Pierre Monteux conducts the *London Symphony Orchestra* on a permanent contract; at the age of 80 he was conceded an extension of 25 years. Leopold Stokowski signed a contract with the RCA at the age of 92 for 10 more years."<sup>19</sup>

The route leading to a reform of scholastic and university publishing policies is long; it will take time to debunk the myths of the most reactionary of traditions, but also to change a mentality that takes refuge in that comfort zone of disregard that fosters a climate of *disturbance and cultural delay*, far stronger in Italy than in other Western countries.

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<sup>18</sup> The only exception is Ewa Michnik (Poland).

<sup>19</sup> From a letter dated the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2012 sent by Elke Mascha Blankenburg to Milena Gammaitoni.

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