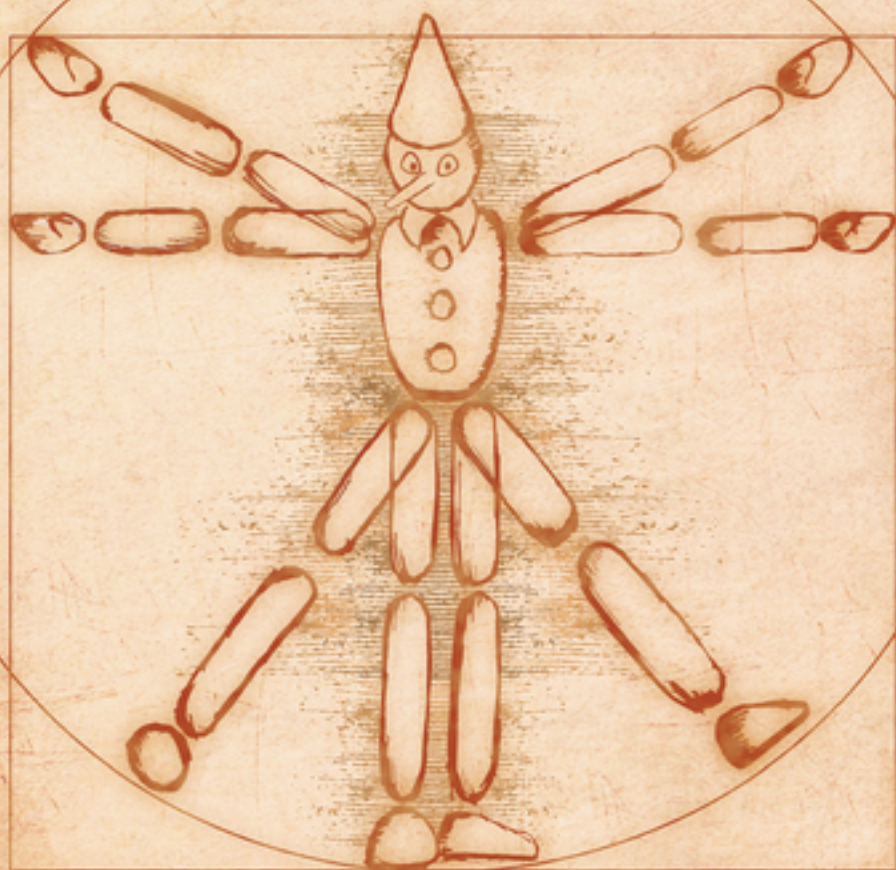


# MAKING THE ITALIANS

POETICS AND POLITICS OF  
ITALIAN CHILDREN'S FANTASY



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## Introduction

Since its first appearance in the mid-1800s the fantasy for children has been one of the most popular and well-loved genres in children's literature.<sup>1</sup> A high proportion of children's classics are fantasies, and many are as popular today as they were when they were first published. Recent years have witnessed a veritable explosion of fantasy novels onto the market, and best-sellers such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–9) and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) have found as enthusiastic an audience with adults as they have with children. Hollywood has developed a voracious appetite for children's fantasy, and many of the most popular works have recently been transformed into high-grossing motion pictures.<sup>2</sup>

The huge boom that has taken place in the fantasy market over the last three decades has instigated a radical shift in critical perspective. Children's fantasies, which were once viewed solely as escapist, childish and formulaic, are now being analysed from a variety of angles. Theoretical studies such as those by Maria Nikolajeva,<sup>3</sup> Anne Swinfen and Farah Mendlesohn have demonstrated that children's fantasies display great variation in form and

- 1 Marcus Crouch has observed that 'it is a commonplace of all writing about children's literature that nearly all the most lasting books are fantasies'. See Marcus Crouch, *The Nesbit Tradition: The Children's Novel 1945–70* (London: Benn, 1972), 120.
- 2 Since the beginning of the millennium several children's fantasies have been made into successful movies. Examples include the *Harry Potter* films (dir. Chris Columbus, Warner Bros., 2001–10), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (dir. Brad Silberling, Paramount, 2004), *The Golden Compass* (dir. Chris Weitz, Newline, 2007), *Coraline* (dir. Henry Selick, Focus Features, 2009), *Alice in Wonderland* (dir. Roth Films, Tim Burton, 2010) *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, New Line, 2001–3), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (dir. Tim Burton, Warner Bros., 2005), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (dir. Andrew Adamson, Walt Disney, 2005) and *Prince Caspian* (dir. Andrew Adamson, Walt Disney, 2008).
- 3 Maria Nikolajeva, *The Magic Code: The Use of Magical Patterns in Fantasy for Children* (Göteborg: Almquist and Wiksell International, 1988).

structure,<sup>4</sup> while contextual research, such as that carried out by Karen Patricia Smith,<sup>5</sup> Colin N. Manlove and Brian Attebery has drawn attention to the socio-political and cultural significance of the genre.<sup>6</sup> The majority of criticism, however, still concentrates almost exclusively on fantasies written in the English language,<sup>7</sup> a trend that, until recently, was also predominant in the majority of encyclopedia of children's literature.<sup>8</sup>

Why is it that fantasies in languages other than English rarely feature in Anglophone studies?<sup>9</sup> The fact that some European fantasies, such as Carlo

- 4 Anne Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) and Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2008).
- 5 Karen Patricia Smith, *The Fabulous Realm: A Literary-Historical Approach to British Fantasy, 1780–1990* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1993).
- 6 Colin N. Manlove, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2003) and Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
- 7 Of the critical works mentioned in the text only that by Nikolajeva considers non-Anglophone fantasies, and even her work concentrates primarily on English-language texts.
- 8 Recent years have witnessed an increasing awareness of the existence of non-Anglophone fantasies by the compilers of encyclopedia of children's literature even though the number of foreign texts included in these works continues to be small. Both the updated *International Companion Encyclopedia to Children's Literature* (2004) edited by Peter Hunt and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (2006) edited by Jack Zipes provide a much more comprehensive international perspective than that which can be found in previous encyclopedia.
- 9 While genre-based research on non-Anglophone fantasy texts is practically non-existent there are some critical works which discuss non-Anglophone fantasies within a broader historical overview. See, for example, Judith Proud, *Children and Propaganda: Il était une fois...: Fiction and Fairy Tale in Vichy France* (Oxford: Intellect Books, 1995) and Penny Brown, *A Critical History of French Children's Literature* vol. II (London: Routledge, 2008). *Beyond Babar: The European Tradition in Children's Literature*, ed. by Sandra L. Beckett and Maria Nikolajeva (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2006) also includes some excellent articles on non-Anglophone fantasies, as does *Children's Literature Global and Local: Social and Aesthetic Perspectives*, ed. by Emer O'Sullivan, Kimberley Reynolds and Rolf Romoron (Oslo: Novus, 2005).

Lorenzini (Collodi)'s *Le avventure di Pinocchio* [Pinocchio], Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* [The Little Prince] and Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte* [The Neverending Story] often receive a brief mention in these works while others do not, might lead one to think that the fantasy genre has been unpopular outside of the English-speaking world. Analysis of Italian children's literature clearly shows, however, that this is not the case. Italian authors have always had a strong passion for combining the real and the fantastic, and the fantasies discussed in this book all employ narrative devices that 'establish a relationship between the fantasy world and our own while at the same time separating the two'.<sup>10</sup> Some tell of children who are transported to secondary worlds by passing through magic portals,<sup>11</sup> some document the fantastic lives of anthropomorphised animals and plants,<sup>12</sup> while others subtly transform the primary world, introducing fantastic secondary worlds, magical objects and other-worldly creatures, into the fabric of everyday life.<sup>13</sup>

10 See Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 66.

11 See, for example, Massimo Bontempelli's *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio* [The chess set in the mirror] which tells the story of a boy who is magically transported to a fantasy kingdom on the other side of a mirror and Annie Vivanti's *Sua Altezza!* [His Highness!] which recounts the adventures of two children who climb inside a painting.

12 See, for example, Dino Buzzati's *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* [The famous invasion of the bears in Sicily] which tells the story of a community of bears, Carmen Gentile's *La repubblica pinguinina* [The penguin republic] which tells the story of the formation of a penguin republic and Gianni Rodari's *Le avventure di Cipollino* [The adventures of Little Onion] which focuses on the everyday lives of anthropomorphised vegetables and fruits.

13 See, for example, Marcello Argilli's *Le avventure di Chiodino* [The adventures of Little Nail] which recounts the adventures of a mechanical robot in 1950s Italy and Gianni Rodari's *Gelsomino nel paese dei bugiardi* [Jericho in the Land of Liars] in which a young boy travels through a series of fantastical secondary worlds in the company of a chalk-drawn cat.

The marginalised position in the international canon of Italian children's fantasies can be attributed, in part, to the scarcity of English translations.<sup>14</sup> As Maria Nikolajeva has observed, 'Italian children's literature after *Pinocchio* is an unknown territory for most international scholars.'<sup>15</sup> Equally significant, however, is the fact that in Italy the term 'fantasy' is generally reserved for works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, works that revolve around an elemental battle between good and evil and which take place in a clearly delineated secondary world.<sup>16</sup> The fantasies that are analysed in this book have thus never been classified as exponents of the fantasy genre, but rather have been viewed as 'favole' [fables],<sup>17</sup> 'fiabe' [fairy tales] or 'racconti fantastici' [fantastic stories].<sup>18</sup> So alien, in fact, is the term 'fantasy' to the Italian literary tradition that the Italian critic, Ermanno Detti, has gone so far as to declare that Italian writers do not write fantasy tales.<sup>19</sup> One should also bear in mind that in the Italian language the noun, 'fantasy', has only one contextual meaning, that

- 14 This lack is duly noted by Jack Zipes in his introduction to the 2002 edition of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, a volume which is dedicated to the discussion of Italian children's literature. See Zipes, 'Editor's Note', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 26 (2002), v–vi.
- 15 Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age* (London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 26.
- 16 See Emy Beseghi's discussion of 'fantasy': Emy Beseghi, 'Introduzione', in William Grandi, *Infanzia e mondi fantastici* (Bologna: Bonomia University Press, 2007), 19–21.
- 17 Vittorio Spinazzola has described Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* as 'una fiaba iniziatica' [an initiation fable]. See Vittorio Spinazzola, *Pinocchio and Co.* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1997), 34.
- 18 For Anna Maria Bernadinis *Pinocchio* is 'una favola didascalica' [a didactic fairy-tale]. See Anna Maria Bernardinis, *Itinerari. Guida critico-storica di narrativa e di divulgazione per l'infanzia e gioventù* (Milan: Fabbri, 1976), 237. For Carlo Marini (2003), meanwhile, it is a 'racconto fantastico'. See Carlo Marini, *Il fantastico* (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2003), 62–6.
- 19 Ermanno Detti, 'Introduction', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 26 (2002), 143–50 (pp. 144–5).

of ‘the imagination,’ having never acquired the more particular definition that it has in the Anglophone world.<sup>20</sup> Fantasy is thus, as Emy Beseghi has observed,<sup>21</sup> not a narrative genre that has a direct translation in Italian.

*Politics and Poetics of the Italian Fantasy for Children* has two principal objectives: to demonstrate that Italian children’s literature encompasses a long tradition of previously unacknowledged fantasy texts and to show that these works are intimately linked to the socio-political environment in which they were written. Examining Italian fantasies for children in concert with the contemporary cultural and socio-political climate can enrich our understanding of Italian society at their time of writing, as well as illuminate the creative processes involved in the production of fantasies for children.

20 For a more detailed analysis of the meanings of the Italian words ‘fantasia’ and ‘fantastico’ see Marini, *Il fantastico*, 15–57 and Beseghi, ‘Introduzione’, 17–22. Both authors note that the Italian genre of ‘the fantastic’ [‘il fantastico’] does not equate to that of ‘fantasy’, being reserved in the Italian language (as it is in the Anglophone world) for works of literature that introduce the inexplicable and the impossible into the fabric of everyday life specifically to unsettle and disturb the reader.

21 ‘In Italian this word refers to a narrative genre that has no direct translation in our language’ [In italiano questa parola indica un genere narrativo che non ha una diretta traduzione nella nostra lingua], ‘Introduzione’, 22.