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Abstract: Given the scarcity of LGBTQ-inclusive children’s literature in Italy (Forni, Venzo, Biemmi), we propose examining established literary *topoi* that, when read through a queer, feminist, and intersectional lens, challenge traditional gender binaries. One of them is the assigned female at birth-to-male (AFAB-to-M) cross-dressing, a recurring motif in children’s fiction across cultural and historical contexts that “has ... never been questioned or censured” but rather “simply been accepted” (Flanagan). Narratives displaying girls adopting male disguises hold subversive potential, complicating the gender order (Butler), and reimagining alternative modes of girlhood. This article seeks to explore how temporary metamorphoses through AFAB-to-M cross-dressing manifest in *La bambina col falcone* / *The Little Girl with The Falcon* (1982) by Bianca Pitzorno, interrogating whether this portrayal reinforces or dismantles binary constructs. We argue that while cross-dressing appears primarily functional, it nonetheless opens significant spaces for gender destabilization.

Keywords: cross-dressing AFAB-to-M; Italian children’s literature; queer children’s literature; Bianca Pitzorno; gender studies

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“Eh, no! La storia non è ancora finita”: AFAB-to-M Cross-Dressing and Gender Performativity in *La bambina col falcone* by Bianca Pitzorno

ANNA FINOZZI & DALILA FORNI*

Introduction

In the United States, out of 1,046 books banned in the academic year 2023–2024, almost half contained LGBTQIA+ themes, most of them targeted at children or teenagers.¹ Similarly, in 2015 in Italy, forty-nine “fiabe gay” (gay fairy tales) were listed for removal from school libraries in a document issued by then-mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro.² While the US and Italian data are not directly comparable, both examples point to a broader cultural unease surrounding the intersection of childhood and LGBTQ+ themes.

Even though the removal of books from school libraries—such as those ordered by local political authorities—does not constitute a formal ban on publication or sale, it reveals how anxieties around gender and sexuality continue to shape both the production and circulation of children’s literature. The connection between childhood and terms such as *queer*, *trans*, and *inclusivity* is a complicated one because, as Carrie Paechter points out, children are considered pre-sexual and, when not pre-sexual, heterosexual.³

It is against this backdrop of institutional resistance that examining narrative practices historically tolerated—precisely because they did not appear threatening—becomes particularly productive. AFAB-to-M cross-dressing is one such practice: long present in children’s fiction, it has largely escaped the scrutiny directed at more explicitly queer content, while nonetheless carrying a subversive potential that deserves closer critical attention.

In Italy, there has been some dynamism in the fields of gender and queer studies, both in early childhood education and in translation studies, considering nonetheless that terms such as *queer*, *LGBTQ+*, and *gay* were not systematically applied to children’s literature until around 2010.⁴ As for Italian case studies, most of the existing work has focused on same-sex parent families featured in books published by independent publishers like Lo Stampatello, while only a few works deal with non-binary characters or representations of gender nonconformity.⁵ Looking at Italian publishing as a whole, it quickly becomes clear that the issue is not a lack of scholarly interest, but a significant gap in the publishing industry itself, which fails to publish, translate, or promote inclusive content.

Our aim is therefore to examine narrative elements that, while not inherently subversive—and therefore less frequently targeted by public and political backlash compared to other forms of gender representations—cross gender boundaries and gesture toward a broader spectrum of identity and emotional possibilities. One such practice is assigned female at birth (AFAB)-to-male cross-dressing: the act of adopting clothes associated with a gender other than the one assigned to birth, in this case

*Anna Finozzi is responsible for the following sections: “Introduction” and “To Cross-Dress or Not to Cross-Dress.” Dalila Forni is responsible for the following sections: “Gender Representations in Bianca Pitzorno’s Novels.” “Cross-Dressing Practices in *La bambina col falcone*” and “Conclusions.”

¹ Out of 1,046 books, 39% have LGBTQ+ characters and nearly 60% are children’s literature. See PEN America, *Beyond the Shelves*.

² See Campagnaro, “Sulle 49 cosiddette ‘fiabe ee.’”

³ Paechter, “Young Children,” 283.

⁴ See D’Arcangelo, Elefante, Illuminati, *Translating for Children Beyond Stereotypes*; Pederzoli and Illuminati, *Tra genere e generi*.

⁵ See Pardi, *Perché hai due mamme?*; Biemmi, “Not Only Princesses and Knights”; Illuminati, “Speak to Me in Capital Letters!”; Trisciuzzi, “Questioni di genere”; Forni, “LGBTQ Families and Picture Books”; Venzo, “Diversity in Italian Picturebooks for Children”; Fierli et al., “Cetriolini e pesci pagliaccio.”

male. In children's media—especially in fairy tales and animated series like *Lady Oscar* and *Mulan*—this practice has a long tradition.⁶ As Anne Duggan observes, the trope of the maiden warrior has been prominent in European traditions at least since the figure of Joan of Arc; indeed, the seventeenth century in France featured a lot of these narratives including in religious retellings.⁷ This *topos*, originating in folklore, has since permeated a wide range of children's narratives, including films, novels, theatrical works, and graphic novels.

To foreground an understanding of AFAB-to-M cross-dressing in Italian children's literature, we focus on *La bambina col falcone* / *The Little Girl with the Falcon*, which was published in 1982 by Bianca Pitzorno.⁸ Pitzorno is notably one of the most successful and studied women authors in the Italian literary landscape, particularly for her extensive contributions to children and young adults' literature. Among Pitzorno's works, *La bambina col falcone* is particularly suited to this inquiry for reasons that go beyond its thematic content. Set in the Middle Ages, the story follows Costanza, a girl who dreams of becoming a knight and joining the Crusades. After escaping a convent, she disguises herself as a boy and sets out on her journey, soon joined by her younger sister Melisenda, who also adopts male attire. The novel's historical setting does not merely provide a historical backdrop, rather, it intensifies gender constraints to the point where cross-dressing becomes narratively necessary. In a world where institutional and social structures explicitly forbid girls from accessing spaces of adventure, knowledge, and military action, male disguise is the only tool available to the protagonists. This narrative necessity makes the ideological dimensions of cross-dressing more visible—and more available for critical analysis—than in contemporary settings where gender norms, while still operative, are less overtly codified.

La bambina col falcone also occupies a strategic position within Pitzorno's corpus. Scholarship has mostly focused on the innovative female characters she has presented.⁹ Contrary to this strong feminist interest in Pitzorno's *oeuvre*, the queer potential of her literature remains almost entirely unexplored. *La bambina col falcone*, published in 1982 at a key moment in Pitzorno's career, is one of the few novels in her corpus where cross-dressing is not a secondary detail. While we acknowledge that cross-dressing can serve as a domesticated narrative tool, we argue that it also carries an intrinsic subversive and, at times, transformative potentialities. In doing so, we argue that what has historically been simply accepted in children's fiction—precisely because it did not appear to challenge the gender order—can, when read carefully, reveal the constructed and unstable nature of gender itself. The tolerance extended to AFAB-to-M cross-dressing narratives is, paradoxically, what makes them such a productive site for queer experimentation.

To Cross-Dress, or Not to Cross-Dress

In this section, we investigate the possibilities of AFAB-to-M cross-dressing in children's literature, firstly looking at its domesticated function, and secondly, at its possibilities of subversion. Before proceeding, however, we shall clarify the terminology. In 2007, Victoria Flanagan's *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film* marked a foundational and pioneering contribution to this field.¹⁰ Since then, scholarship on AFAB-to-M cross-dressing has expanded,

⁶ For a broader investigation on *Lady Oscar*, see Andreani et al, *Lady Oscar*; and Ganim, "Fleur Rebelle, Fleur Royale." For *Mulan*, see Hsieh and Matoush, "Filial Daughter."

⁷ Duggan, "The Revolutionary Undoing of the Maiden Warrior," 37.

⁸ See Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*.

⁹ See Barsotti, "Bianca Pitzorno e le sue bambine"; Barsotti, "Bambine protagoniste"; Tosi, "Dalla parte delle bambine"; Forni, "Breaking female stereotypes."

¹⁰ See Flanagan, *Into the Closet*.

though it continues to occupy a marginal position, often limited to fairy-tale settings. This marginality may be attributed, in part, to a shift in critical vocabulary. Within children’s literature studies, the term *cross-dressing* has increasingly been supplanted by expressions such as *strategic gender passing* or *temporary gender disguise*—terms that adopt a more cautious approach and tend to operate within a binary conception of gender. As we fully support the use of more inclusive terms, we contend that the expression AFAB-to-M cross-dressing still remains crucial for understanding a traditional literary *topos* that was explicitly constructed around binary gender coding. The very prefix *cross-* implies the traversal of a culturally and historically constructed boundary between what has been codified as male and female—between distinct gender performances. Acknowledging this, we do not aim to reinstate outdated terminology at the expense of more progressive frameworks. Rather, our intention is to foreground a historically resonant practice that continues to reach wide audiences and, through its narrative structures, may open space for queer readings and imaginative transgressions.

As numerous scholars in the field of children’s literature have sharply argued, AFAB-to-M cross-dressing is not inherently subversive. One of the most prominent voices to challenge assumptions of inclusivity surrounding cross-dressed children is Karín Lesnik-Oberstein.¹¹ In her critique of ostensibly progressive narratives, Lesnik-Oberstein warns against the tendency to interpret cross-dressing straightforwardly as a form of empowerment. Rather, she contends that such narratives are often shaped by adultocentric and heteronormative frameworks in which both *childhood* and *gender* are discursively constructed and regulated.¹² In this view, cross-dressing is less an act of liberation than a reiteration of social expectations, structured by adult-defined norms of gender and identity.

This process of domestication—whereby potentially disruptive acts are rendered safe or even desirable—is central to the historical tolerance of AFAB-to-M cross-dressing in children’s literature. The first reason for this relative acceptance is that a girl who dresses as a boy performs an *upward* move in the patriarchal symbolic order. It’s not surprising, then, that this kind of narrative is often portrayed positively, sometimes even heroically. In stark contrast, male-to-female (M-to-F) cross-dressing is frequently stigmatized or mocked, as it is perceived to involve a symbolic forfeiture of male privilege. As Victoria Flanagan notes, a boy who dresses “like a girl” enacts a more profound transgression—one that provokes discomfort because it disrupts entrenched gender hierarchies.¹³ This asymmetry persists beyond the page, as seen in the public backlash against cultural practices such as the well-known Drag Queen Story Hour, an initiative launched by Michelle Tea in 2015, in which drag performers read stories to children.¹⁴

A second reason for this tolerance may lie in the perceived reversibility of the disguise: the girl wears clothes seemingly for a boy only for a limited time and eventually returns to feminine attire. In classic narratives (e.g., *Mulan*), cross-dressing is often functional: a girl takes on a male identity to perform a heroic deed or gain access to male-only spaces. Here, cross-dressing is not motivated by identity but by necessity, neutralizing the subversive potential of the act. The protagonist does not *choose* to become male as a form of self-expression but temporarily assumes a role to achieve a goal. A third reason lies in the way AFAB-to-M cross-dressing does not threaten the underlying heteronormative structures. As feminist scholars like Lissa Paul have noted, cross-dressing can paradoxically reinforce gender stereotypes rather than dismantle them—especially when it merely illustrates that gender can be performed to gain advantages.¹⁵ Such stories frequently end with heterosexual resolution, affirming rather than challenging normative sexuality; in this case, cross-

¹¹ See Lesnik-Oberstein, “Children’s Literature.”

¹² See Lesnik-Oberstein, “Children’s Literature.”

¹³ Flanagan, *Into the Closet*, 136.

¹⁴ See Conte, “Drag Queens, Children, and Libraries, Oh My!”

¹⁵ See Paul, “Enigma Variations.”

dressings upholds the “normalization of sexuality along the heterosexual/homosexual axis.”¹⁶ Finally, these narratives tend to conclude with a reaffirmation of patriarchal norms. The girl’s disguise typically serves the interests of her father, family, or kingdom, and the story arc culminates in the restoration of established hierarchies: “When the heroine restores order by the end of the tale, she abandons her masculine attire to resume her position as a woman, either beside a prince or king through marriage or within the domestic space.”¹⁷

So far, AFAB-to-M cross-dressing in children’s and young adult literature appears to be a functional, domesticated, even neutral practice. But how can AFAB-to-M cross-dressing be potentially subversive or even transformative in children’s literature?

As we know from gender studies’ theories, gender norms operate through the repetitive performance of clothing, behaviour, language, and posture. To challenge these repetitions can somehow alter the dynamics at play. Children’s literature, especially that directed to young children, is a space where gender codes are more prescriptive than in adult literature. In picturebooks, bodies are typically desexualized and binary genders are differentiated by clothing, hairstyles, and colors. Altering these signifiers can provoke significant semantic shifts. For example, placing a boy in a pink shirt can trigger both semantic revaluation and broader cultural anxieties around gender and identity. Cross-dressing narratives, by altering the visual and behavioral markers of gender, can serve to destabilize what Raewyn Connell has termed the “gender order,” which is the sociocultural system that constructs relations between genders male/female and it is regulated along binary opposition of labor’s assignments, authority, cathexis, and symbolism.¹⁸

In *Gender Troubles*, Judith Butler claims that cross-dressing is a political act—not one of *revealing* an identity but of exposing the constructed and prescriptive nature of gender. She refers specifically to drag as a parody not of feminization but as a parody of both genders and its construction. Likewise, the girl who cross-dresses exposes masculinity as replicable and artificial, while also unmasking femininity as a regulatory ideal imposed by adult authority. In this way, cross-dressing in children’s literature—despite its domesticated presentation—has the potential to challenge both gender essentialism and adult power.

It is in the oscillation between childhood and adulthood—where children remain under the control and surveillance of adults—that cross-dressing can emerge as subversive within children’s literature. The phenomenon of *aetonormativity*, or age-based oppression, often intersects with gender-based forms of regulation and constraint.¹⁹ Cross-dressing narratives typically involve adult figures, whether as supporters, enforcers, or antagonists, and adulthood often comes to represent the symbolic return to an original, *proper* gender identity. One reason cross-dressing is tolerated in children’s narratives may be that it is framed as a temporary, playful deviation—something safely confined to the domain of childhood.²⁰ However, the complicity of certain adult characters in these acts of gender nonconformity can also be read as a form of reverse subversion: when girls reject the norms imposed on their gender, they are not only transgressing gender boundaries but also challenging adult authority. In this sense, even when cross-dressing is subject to adult oversight or treated as a childish transgression, it reaffirms the gap between adult expectations and children’s agency. When framed within a narrative, this gap can empower young readers by demonstrating that adult norms are not fixed, but rather open to critique and disruption.

¹⁶ Saxena, “Growing up Drag,” 274.

¹⁷ Duggan, “The Revolutionary Undoing of the Maiden Warrior,” 34.

¹⁸ See Connell, *Gender and Power*.

¹⁹ Nikolajeva, “Theory, post-theory, and aetonormative theory,” 16.

²⁰ See Lesnik-Oberstein, “Children’s Literature.”

To this regard, it is worth noticing that girls who choose to dress as boys are often already marginal or in conflict with social expectations, which are typically enforced by adults. Cross-dressing thus becomes both a means of survival and a vehicle for imagining new forms of subjectivity and agency. As Paechter has observed, children may attempt to insert themselves into the “heterosexual matrix” as a way to claim entry into adulthood and, thus the social contract; by engaging in practices typically restricted to adults—such as performing normative heterosexuality—children “make claims to adult rights and privileges by asserting that they are, essentially, the same as adults.”²¹ This mechanism underscores the dual challenge embedded in cross-dressing narratives: they question not only gender norms but also the broader structures of age-based power. Notably, girls who choose to dress as boys are often already marginal figures, placed in conflict with social norms usually upheld by adult figures.

By enabling a female character to *pass* as male through clothing, behavior, and gesture, cross-dressing problematizes the assumed link between biological sex and gender identity. It challenges the notion that traits associated with masculinity—such as physical prowess, stoicism, or leadership—are inherently tied to male bodies, suggesting instead that these are socially inscribed performances accessible across genders. This dynamic becomes particularly pronounced in young adult (YA) narratives, where the body takes on heightened symbolic and narrative significance. Puberty—the development of secondary sex characteristics like breasts or hips—renders the sexed body more visible and reinforces the imperative to conform to gender binaries. Even so, cross-dressing continues to operate as a site of tension and potential subversion. While many traditional narratives ultimately restore the protagonist to a conventionally feminine role—thus reasserting the sex/gender alignment—such returns are rarely seamless. As Saxena notes, these stories often introduce a degree of “gender confusion” that reveals the arbitrariness of normative associations between body, gender, and desire.²²

This slippage between gender presentation and identity also gestures toward queerness. Although cross-dressing in itself does not determine sexual orientation, nonconforming appearances are frequently policed in children’s texts due to their perceived association with same-sex desire. Butler’s concept of the *heterosexual matrix*—the cultural system that naturalizes the alignment of sex, gender, and desire—helps to explain why cross-dressing girls are often surveilled by adult figures within the narrative.²³ The girl who behaves too much like a boy risks disrupting heterosexual expectations, and must be corrected, re-assimilated into normative femininity, which ultimately is policed to preserve heterosexuality.

Yet queer potential persists. As Elena Emma Sottilotta argues, cross-dressing narratives often exceed the boundaries of the written text, taking on new life in intermedial adaptations.²⁴ In her case-study of the miniseries *Fantaghirò*, the male protagonist falls in love with the eponymous heroine, without being certain of her sex. This introduces a queer subtext that opens the tale to alternative readings.²⁵ Similarly, *Lady Oscar*—despite ending in heterosexual resolution—has been reclaimed as a queer icon, with her close bond to Marie Antoinette reframed by fans as romantically or erotically charged.²⁶ These examples show that while cross-dressing may not explicitly subvert heteronormativity within the diegesis, it creates interpretive space for non-normative desires and identifications.

²¹ Paechter, “Young Children,” 289.

²² Saxena, “Growing up Drag,” 287.

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

²⁴ See Sottilotta, “Fantaghirò as an ‘Artist’ Adaptation.”

²⁵ Sottilotta, “Fantaghirò as an ‘Artist’ Adaptation,” 113.

²⁶ See Glenhaber, “Transmasculinity and Queer Sexuality.”

Ultimately, cross-dressing in children's and YA literature occupies an ambiguous but potentially radical position. The experience of living as a boy grants female characters access to forms of agency, mobility, and social privilege typically reserved for male protagonists. Even when these characters return to a feminine presentation, the journey is not erased. As Flanagan suggests, they emerge as transformed figures, occupying a liminal or hybrid space that resists binary classification. This third positionality, forged through performance, enables a reimagining of gender not as essence but as possibility.

Bianca Pitzorno's Novels

The third positionality described above provides a productive framework for reading Bianca Pitzorno's body of work as a whole. Even when cross-dressing is absent, her female protagonists consistently occupy a hybrid position: neither fully contained within normative femininity nor straightforwardly coded as masculine. This structural in-betweenness makes Pitzorno's fiction particularly receptive to queer analysis.

Bianca Pitzorno—born in Sassari in 1942—has played a central role in reshaping gender representation in Italian children's literature by providing young female readers with complex and unconventional protagonists. Designated as a “madre letteraria di sole figlie femmine” (literary mother of only female daughters), Pitzorno is widely recognized for her pioneering contributions to children's fiction, particularly through her depiction of diverse and dynamic female characters that defy gender standards.²⁷ Despite the lack of academic studies on the topic and a major focus on a feminist/feminine perspective, Pitzorno's novels could also be interpreted through a queer lens for their ability to deconstruct gender norms and heteronormative practices and to highlight gender performativity.²⁸

The author has repeatedly emphasized the transformative potential of literature, asserting that children's books have a pivotal role in fostering new cultural sensibilities.²⁹ Pitzorno draws on her personal memories to highlight a paradox: although girls are statistically more likely to read than boys, they remain underrepresented in literary works for children. She observes that classic literature often presented male-centred adventures as the only narrative framework, leaving female readers with limited options, typically confined to romance or domestic tales. Pitzorno states that young female readers require access to a broader literary canon—one that includes adventure, coming-of-age narratives, and stories that explore the full range of human emotion, including grief, joy, and personal growth.³⁰

In her view, literature should offer well-rounded female characters in order to expand children's understanding of what is possible for girls—both within fictional worlds and in real life—thus overcoming historical discrimination that still perpetuates sexist and heteronormative dynamics.³¹ Quoting her words:

Ma torniamo ai classici che furono per me fonte di incomparabili godimenti ed anche modelli letterari. Se richiamo alla mente i loro protagonisti sia pure in modo disorganico e confuso mi vedo circondata da una folla di maschi: bambini, ragazzi, uomini di tutte le età, nazionalità, caratteristiche fisiche, condizioni sociali. Vogliamo provare a pescare a caso nel mucchio? Robinson e il Piccolo Principe,

²⁷ Beseghi, *Nel giardino di Gaia*, 70; see Casella, *Le voci segrete*.

²⁸ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

²⁹ See Barsotti, *Le storie usate*.

³⁰ Forni, “Breaking female stereotypes,” 68.

³¹ See Ulivieri, *Educazione al femminile*.

Sandokan ... e Giamburrasca, Mowgli e il Capitano Nemo, Remy e David Copperfield, ... Jim e Peter Pan ... Gulliver, Christopher Robin, Tom Sawyer... C'erano anche libri, ricordo, che avevano per protagonisti una coppia mista di bambini o ragazzi. La bambina però era di solito una comprimaria un po' sacrificata ... era addirittura la piagnona che con la sua fragilità e le sue fisime rallentava il ritmo della avventura.³²

Consequently, Pitzorno creates characters who are frequently unconventional and employ irony and humor to subvert gender stereotypes. In particular, her literary works are noteworthy for their ability to give voice to intelligent, curious, determined, lively girls and young women, thereby challenging the narrative tradition that had historically relegated female characters to passive or marginal roles.³³ Her protagonists frequently engage in activities that are typically associated with male-dominated spheres: rather than remaining confined to domestic or scholastic settings, they explore open, unpredictable spaces, venture into urban landscapes, and confront the external world. Through realistic and dynamic stories, Pitzorno's protagonists achieve empowerment and self-awareness, navigating the complexities of growing up. Moreover, the author offers a sociological analysis of the evolution of societal attitudes towards gender and social roles. Her female characters often pursue professions such as lawyers, engineers, and architects, reflecting broader societal shifts and the reconfiguration of family dynamics.³⁴ This narrative strategy serves to underscore the social empowerment of women, both in fiction and in everyday life. In her works, Pitzorno explores the theme of femininity across various generations, providing young readers with a comprehensive array of identities and possibilities. She also carefully selects distinctive names—often drawn from books and calendars—to create memorable and unique characters.³⁵

Pitzorno's novels successfully address complex issues such as social inequality and the contradictions and limitations of gender norms. Consequently, the author offers readers food for thought and new possibilities for identification through alternative models.³⁶ Her protagonists not only bravely face the injustices of the adult world, but also embody alternative models of femininity, in which autonomy, creativity and solidarity become tools for emancipation and social change.³⁷ Works such as *L'incredibile storia di Lavinia / Lavinia and the Magic Ring* (1979), *Extraterrestre alla pari / The Alien Au Pair* (1985), and *Principessa Laurentina / Princess Laurentina* (1990) do not merely tell stories; they suggest new frameworks for identification, transforming literature into a tool for awareness and change.³⁸ In this sense, Pitzorno's writing can be considered a political and cultural act, contributing to the construction of inclusive and multi-faceted collective imagination, where different readers can recognize themselves as active protagonists of their own destiny.³⁹ Rather than following pre-

³² “But let's go back to the classics, which were for me a source of incomparable enjoyment and also literary models. If I try to recall their protagonists—even in a disorganized and confused way—I see myself surrounded by a crowd of males: boys, young men, and men of all ages, nationalities, physical traits, and social conditions. Shall we try to pick at random from the bunch? Robinson and the Little Prince, Sandokan ... and Giamburrasca, Mowgli and Captain Nemo, Remy and David Copperfield ... Jim and Peter Pan ... Gulliver, Christopher Robin, Tom Sawyer... There were also books, I recall, that featured a mixed pair of children or young people as protagonists. But the girl was usually a somewhat diminished sidekick ... she was even the crybaby who, with her fragility and whims, slowed down the pace of the adventure.” Pitzorno, “Ho il diritto di pensare, disse Alice alla duchessa,” 38–39. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Italian texts are my own.

³³ On the topic of gendered representations, see Biemmi, *Educazione sessista*.

³⁴ See Garavini, “Bianca Pitzorno.”

³⁵ Caso, “Scrivere per l'infanzia,” 19.

³⁶ See Forni, “Breaking female stereotypes.”

³⁷ See Barsotti, “Bianca Pitzorno e le sue bambine”; Barsotti, “Bambine protagoniste.”

³⁸ See Beseghi, “Bianca, Lavinia e le altre”; Beseghi, “Streghetta, Lavinia, Clorofilla e le altre.”

³⁹ See Garavini, “Bianca Pitzorno.”

established paths, this destiny is characterized by the deconstruction of social standards, allowing for new ways of conceiving identity that are not constrained by traditional norms.

Cross-Dressing Practices in La bambina col falcone

While cross-dressing in the literal sense—the adoption of male clothing as disguise—is most fully developed in *La bambina col falcone*, gender performativity as a broader narrative strategy can be found in many of Pitzorno's works. Protagonists such as Lavinia in *L'incredibile storia di Lavinia* resist feminine norms through behavior, speech, and aspiration rather than through dress. Besides portraying unconventional female protagonists who expose the fragility of gender-based social norms, Bianca Pitzorno employs cross-dressing as a queer narrative strategy to further underscore the performative and fluid nature of gender identity. For instance, in *Polissena del Porcello* (Polyxena of the Piglet, 1993), the protagonist adopts a male disguise—and the name Ludovico—for reasons of safety during a journey, after her hair has been forcibly cut by her stepmother.⁴⁰ As in *La bambina col falcone*, the cross-dressing is explicitly functional: it is Polissena's companion Lucrezia who suggests maintaining the disguise, since in her opinion travelling as a boy offers greater protection. Yet here too the performance blurs with character's construction: Ludovico il Ragno becomes a recognized public personality, going beyond its original protective purpose.

La bambina col falcone remains, however, the text in which cross-dressing is most structurally indispensable to the plot, which is precisely why it serves as the central case study here. Published by Bruno Mondadori in 1982 as part of a school-oriented series, the novel received little immediate critical attention, yet went on to become one of Pitzorno's most widely read works, remaining in print through multiple editions across different publishers. The absence of critical controversy surrounding the novel is itself significant: cross-dressing practices passed unnoticed as a potentially subversive element, absorbed perhaps into the broader tolerance historically extended to AFAB-to-M disguise narratives; a tolerance that, as this article argues, is precisely what makes them such a productive site for queer inquiry.

La bambina col falcone is set in medieval Italy, in the household of Madonna Yvette and Messer Rufo, an imperial falconer serving under the command of Frederick II. The protagonists are their daughters, and specifically thirteen-year-old Costanza, who dreams of joining the pilgrims departing for the Crusade to reclaim the Holy Sepulchre. Her aspiration is initially rooted in her imagination, fuelled by her reading of chivalric romances. Through these readings, she imagines herself as a knight in shining armor: “già si vedeva in sella a un cavallo bianco, vestita di un'armatura lucente... agile e veloce, con i capelli al vento e le mani libere per le briglie, per la spada e per gli eroici saluti” (she already saw herself on the saddle of a white horse, dressed in shining armor... swift and agile, with her hair blowing in the wind and her hands free—for the reins, for the sword, and for heroic salutes).⁴¹

Costanza's unconventional desires are supported by characters such as the knight Konrad, who comforts her and promises to instruct her in all the necessary skills for joining the Crusaders. Conversely, Costanza's mother expresses concern over her daughter's fervent imagination, shaped by thoughts of war she deems inappropriate for a young girl. Costanza is determined to realize her aspirations and requests guidance from Atabèk, the blacksmith, on how to restore her grandfather Tancredi's ancient armor, which dates back to the First Crusade. However, after her mother's death, her father, concerned that Costanza might actually embark on a Crusade, sends her to a convent. Assisted by the nanny Alienor, the girl successfully evades the convent, adopts a male disguise

⁴⁰ See Finozzi, “About Pigs and Girls.”

⁴¹ Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 24.

consisting of her old, shabby armor, and takes on the name Berardo. Costanza clearly represents the common trope of the maiden warrior but the girl is described as a “guerriero appiedato, un cavaliere senza cavallo” (a warrior on foot, a knight without a horse), a sentence that underscores the imperfection of her transition—functional to her mission, yet not entirely convincing.⁴²

Alongside the protagonist, the text introduces her younger sister Melisenda, who, like Costanza, challenges conventional gender roles through her passion for falconry. This activity, which is often regarded as stereotypically masculine, is immediately encouraged by her father despite his daughter’s gender. Having located Costanza after her escape, Melisenda decides to join her sister as a squire, once more wearing male attire and choosing the name Federico. Pitzorno provides the following description of the meeting between the two sisters:

“Vedo che viaggiate sotto spoglie maschili,” disse poi Melisenda. “Come vi fate chiamare, adesso?”

“Berardo.”

“Bene, messer Berardo. Montate sul vostro cavallo. Che razza di cavaliere pensavate di essere, a piedi? Io sarò il vostro scudiero e il mio nome sarà Federico.”

“Come il re?”

“Come il re. E come il figlio maschio che nostro padre non ha mai avuto. Avete qualcosa da ridire? E vi avverto che non sarò uno scudiero molto ubbidiente. Anzi sarete voi, mio bel cavaliere, a seguire i miei consigli. Ne avrete bisogno. Prima di tutto per uscire da questa palude. Quindi seguitemi e non protestate!”⁴³

This verbal exchange between the sisters serves as a crucial moment in the narrative, revealing not only their complicity but also the symbolic weight of naming and cross-dressing. First of all, the naming exchange marks the beginning of a new identity—unquestioned by her sister, who willingly calls Costanza by her new name, Berardo. In addition, the expression “sotto spoglie maschili” (in male disguise) serves to underscore the notion that Costanza’s cross-dressing practice constitutes a mere functional disguise. While her external appearance changes, her internal sense of self and gender performance remain unaltered. Nevertheless, her actions and dreams necessitate male clothing to become socially acceptable. This shift does not signify the dissolution of established patterns or the exploration of new gender identities; rather, it is an effort to legitimize the girls’ non-canonical attitudes, which were culturally deemed inappropriate or unacceptable.

Furthermore, within the context of the cross-dressing process, the novel makes no explicit reference to the corporeity of the protagonists, particularly that of the thirteen-year-old Costanza. There is no mention of efforts to conceal her developing female body, although the armor may implicitly contribute to its disguising. In Melisenda’s case, too, her body—presumably that of a child due to her age of approximately ten years—is obscured within the voluminous folds of her disguise. There is no active attempt to conceal it, nor is there a need to explicitly observe or acknowledge the body itself. Consequently, the typical manifestations of doubt, fear, transformation, and self-discovery that characterize the protagonists’ age, particularly Costanza, who is in the midst of puberty, are not narrated, strengthening the functional aim of the cross-dressing. The only reference to the female body concerns the hair, which the girls cut off at neck height, in accordance with conventional AFAB-

⁴² Duggan, “The Revolutionary Undoing of the Maiden Warrior,” 37; Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 71.

⁴³ “I see you’re traveling in male disguise,” said Melisenda. “What do you call yourself now?” “Berardo.” “Very well, Sir Berardo. Mount your horse. What kind of knight did you think you were, on foot? I shall be your squire, and my name will be Federico.” “Like the king?” “Like the king. And like the son our father never had. Do you have a problem with that? And let me warn you I won’t be a very obedient squire. In fact, my handsome knight, you’ll be the one taking advice from me. You’ll need it. First of all, to get out of this swamp. So follow me and don’t complain!” Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 83.

to-M cross-dressing imagery. In this imagery, the cutting off of the quintessentially feminine element, long hair, corresponds to a new gender experimentation, to a refusal of canonical femininity. However, this rejection is not new for the girls; rather, it is a continuation of the girls' already non-conforming identities, which the act of cross-dressing merely renders socially acceptable, rather than further transforming it.

During their travels, the two male-looking sisters encounter several acquaintances, including the courtier Bencivenni. They are also challenged by Baron Guglielmo and Konrad, Messer Rufo's page. The fight ultimately results in a tragic outcome for the two girls, who are identified by the knights. The men's reaction varies: Bencivenni "non capiva più niente" (didn't understand anything anymore) and "temeva di aver battuto la testa" (feared he had hit his head), while Konrad reprimands Melisenda saying: "Melisenda! Che sciocchezze andate dicendo? E cosa fate in giro per il mondo coi capelli tagliati in malomodo e con questo ridicolo vestito?" (Melisenda! What nonsense are you talking about? And what are you doing wandering around the world with your hair cut badly and dressed like that?). Guglielmo tells the girls:

Che prodi e ricchi prigionieri abbiamo fatto in questa gloriosa giornata! La testa rossa figlia del falconiere Rufo... e scommetto che il giovane cavaliere malconcio è la sua bella sorella maggiore... Guardate, Konrad, come si trasforma una dama leggiadra se le togliete il vestito, i gioielli e la pettinatura! I miei omaggi, comunque, damigella!⁴⁴

When deprived of their male attire, the two girls lose their authority to such an extent that the two young knights mock them on the basis of their physical appearance (they point out how poorly their hair is cut and how ridiculous their dress is). The knights immediately relocate them within the feminine sphere, making the girls a minority and objectifying them through appreciation or physical markers with adjectives such as *bella* (beautiful) and *leggiadra* (graceful), along with a proposal for rescue:

È meglio viaggiare in compagnia, credetemi" assicurò loro Guglielmo. "Le strade sono pericolose: il cibo non è sufficiente per tutti i viaggiatori diretti a Brindisi e i rifornimenti tardano ad arrivare. Dicono che negli accampamenti del re sia scoppiata un'epidemia. Sapete come succede in questi casi: i ladri e i briganti si fanno più audaci, i soldati più molesti... non è bene che due ragazze viaggino da sole." "Veramente eravamo travestite da maschi e viaggiavamo in compagnia di messer Bencivenni..." obiettò Costanza.⁴⁵

This episode, while seemingly anecdotal, reveals deeper tensions between appearance and identity, and serves as a turning point in the novel's exploration of gender performance. Moving beyond the narrative surface, it becomes clear that Pitzorno is engaging with broader questions about the legitimacy of female agency in historically male-dominated spaces. Cross-dressing thus functions as a practical strategy to reach empowerment and agency, and emerges as the only viable means for the girls to avoid being perceived as passive *damsels in distress*, and thus to perform a non-canonical

⁴⁴ "What brave and wealthy prisoners we have captured on this glorious day! The red-headed daughter of the falconer Rufo... and I bet the young, battered knight is her beautiful older sister... Look, Konrad, how a graceful lady transforms once you take away her dress, jewels, and hairstyle! My compliments, nonetheless, fair maiden!" Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 125.

⁴⁵ "It's better to travel in company, believe me," Guglielmo assured them. "The roads are dangerous: there isn't enough food for all the travellers headed to Brindisi, and supplies are slow to arrive. They say an epidemic has broken out in the king's camps. You know how it goes in these cases: thieves and brigands become bolder; soldiers more troublesome... it's not wise for two girls to travel alone." "Actually, we were disguised as boys and traveling with Messer Bencivenni..." objected Costanza." Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 126.

femininity. It is only through the use of male clothes that the two girls can actually be themselves and follow their dreams, avoiding social judgments and limitations.

Significantly, however, their parents are quite indifferent to the girls' gender experiments. The father's role in particular deserves attention: he encourages Melisenda in her passion for falconry and prevents Costanza from leaving for the crusades not because she is a girl, but because he is against the crusades per se, so much so that he hopes to have no male sons so as not to see them taking part to the expedition. In the end, due to a severe illness, Costanza is unable to leave for the long-dreamed-of Crusades and is taken home for treatment. However, it is Melisenda, in her female attire and without the necessity to disguise her gender, who has the opportunity to accompany her father in the Crusade and study falconry with the Saracens. Thus, the father grants his daughter access to a typically male space that Costanza—the one who cross-dressed—never reaches. The father takes the role of an ally in the disruption of gender canons, a narrative element suggesting that, in Pitzorno's fictional world, the dismantling of gender constraints can sometimes come from unexpected directions, including from within the patriarchal structure itself.

Costanza's trajectory, by contrast, takes a more melancholic turn, as she stands on the docks at Brindisi, gazing as the vessels depart into the horizon to join the Crusades. As the final sail disappears, she surrenders to a flood of emotion and tears and embraces Alienor to look for comfort in a moment of deep sadness. Alienor, in turn, says: “potevate partire anche voi, se lo desideravate tanto” (“You could have left too, if you wanted so much.”)⁴⁶ Costanza replies:

No, il re ha portato mio padre espressamente perché studi le abitudini dei falconieri saraceni, non per combattere. In questo incarico gli sarà molto più utile Melisenda. E poi, cosa sarei andata a fare, io ...? Ma se fossimo andate entrambe, chi avrebbe badato alle bambine? Ti ho confidato, Alienor, che ... ho deciso che non mi sarei mai sposata e che sarei rimasta a governare la casa di nostro padre. Tanto vale che cominci adesso! Così al suo ritorno Melisenda potrà andare a corte e godersi i suoi falchi e le sue discussioni erudite. Non è giusto che si sacrifichi per noi. In fondo sono io la figlia maggiore!”
 “Come sembrate savia, oggi, madonna Costanza! ... Che siate cresciuta, finalmente?”
 “Ho sedici anni, ormai” rispose offesa la ragazza. “Alla mia età tante donne sono già madri di molti figli...”⁴⁷

Costanza's reply demonstrates her settling back into the norm, whilst simultaneously preserving the exuberant traits of her personality. The experience of cross-dressing appears not to have encouraged her, but rather to have caused her disillusionment; rather than opening her up to new experiences, it seems to have reduced her enthusiasm, so much so that she chooses to stay at home and abandon her dream of the Crusades. This apparent paradox deserves closer attention. Within the theoretical framework outlined earlier, Costanza's retreat may also be read less as a failure of cross-dressing than as its logical outcome when deployed as a purely functional strategy: once the disguise is removed, no new identity remains to sustain the transgression. In addition, Costanza makes this choice with apparent agency: she states that Melisenda will be more useful to their father, that someone must care for the younger sisters, and that—as she is the eldest daughter—the responsibility falls to her. The

⁴⁶ Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 183.

⁴⁷ “No, the king has brought my father expressly so that he studies the habits of the Saracen falconers, not to fight. Melisenda will be much more useful in this task. And besides, what would I have gone to do, huh [...] But if we had both gone, who would have taken care of the little girls? I confided in you, Alienor, that [...] I've decided I will never marry and that I will remain to manage our father's household. I might as well start now! That way, when he returns, Melisenda can go to court and enjoy her hawks and her learned discussions. It isn't fair that she sacrifices herself for us. After all, I am the eldest daughter!” “How wise you seem today, Lady Costanza! [...] Have you finally grown up?” “I'm sixteen now,” replied the girl, offended. “At my age, many women are already mothers of many children...” Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 183.

subversive experience of cross-dressing has sharpened her self-awareness within the constraints of the very roles she wanted to escape. This recalls the complexity Lissa Paul identifies: cross-dressing, rather than dismantling the patriarchal structure, ultimately illuminates it, and Costanza actively chooses to inhabit it. Her choice goes back to tradition, but Costanza now critically knows, from the inside, what she is returning to. Actually, Costanza also juxtaposes new typically feminine roles with a masculine role, the defense of her home. During the absence of the father and sister, their house is transformed into a fortress: “Costanza andò a ripescare la vecchia corazza e le armi del nonno Tancredi e le sistemò nell’atrio, per poterle indossare subito in caso di necessità...” (Costanza went to retrieve her grandfather Tancredi’s old armor and weapons and placed them in the hall, so she could put them on immediately if needed...).⁴⁸ However, the armor is not worn again by the girl, thereby destroying any possibility of an actual fight, which Costanza deeply desired.

Further exasperating the situation, when her father and Melisenda return home, Melisenda informs her sister: “Costanza, avevate ragione voi. Valeva davvero la pena di andare alla crociata!” (You were right, Costanza. It was really worth going to the Crusade!).⁴⁹ Costanza, the protagonist who most experimented with her identity through cross-dressing, is therefore the one who will not succeed in realizing her dreams, while Melisenda, who decides to become a female falconer rather than dressing as a man (except for the interlude at Costanza’s side), will assert herself in a much more marked way, without the need to pretend to be someone else. While cross-dressing exposes the constructed nature of gender roles, the narrative ultimately suggests that self-assertion in non-traditional domains is possible without renouncing one’s identity, but rather by reshaping the social space around it. It is precisely Melisenda—and not Costanza—who becomes a model of emulation for their younger sisters in the final line of the novel: “‘Tutto è bene quel che finisce bene!’ sospirò felice Alienor. ‘Eh, no! La storia non è ancora finita’ protestò Sibilla. ‘Messer padre, io ho già otto anni. Quando vi deciderete a regalarmi un falcone?’”⁵⁰

It is also worth noting that the novel’s title does not name Costanza, the protagonist who actively cross-dresses, but her sister Melisenda. It is Melisenda who receives the falcon, who earns the right to practice falconry, who departs for the Crusade. The title thus encodes the novel’s central argument before the narrative begins: the figure who ultimately prevails is not the one who disguised herself as a boy, but the one who claimed a masculine symbol while choosing to adopt female identity.

La bambina col falcone can thus be interpreted as a case of functional rather than subversive or identity-driven cross-dressing. The protagonists neither feel male nor wish to experiment more fluid gender identities, but take on a male identity in order to escape gender norms, to perform a heroic action and to access spaces and dynamics forbidden to the feminine. These dynamics are even more pronounced in the medieval historical context of reference. Consequently, on the one hand, the novel provides new spaces for identity experimentation, highlighting gender performativity and destabilising *gender order* through an alteration of visual and behavioral markers of gender.⁵¹ On the other hand, however, the novel echoes Lissa Paul’s aforementioned thought that cross-dressing can paradoxically reinforce stereotypes when based on acting a given gender to one’s own advantage.

The transformative effect of cross-dressing cited by Flanagan occurs in this case more on potential readers than on the protagonist herself: first of all, History (albeit mixed with fiction) is told and conceptualized from a new perspective—the feminine and juvenile perspective, which had often been silenced in historiographical reconstruction—while the fictitious experience of the two sisters

⁴⁸ Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 210.

⁴⁹ Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 225.

⁵⁰ “All’s well that ends well!” sighed Alienor happily. “Oh no! The story isn’t over yet,” protested Sibilla. “Father, I’m already eight years old. When will you decide to give me a falcon?” Pitzorno, *La bambina col falcone*, 248.

⁵¹ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Connell, *Gender and Power*.

gives readers the opportunity to dismantle and reassemble gender constructs, to unmask their arbitrariness.⁵²

Conclusion

La bambina col falcone demonstrates that literature for young readers can serve as a powerful space for reflecting on gender roles and social expectations. Through its depiction of female protagonists who engage in cross-dressing to access freedom, knowledge, and adventure, the novel foregrounds the performative nature of gender. However, this performativity is not framed as a fluid or identity-driven transformation, but rather as a functional and strategic adaptation to a rigidly binary world—both in fiction and in real life—where girls and women are oppressed and silenced.

As Victoria Flanagan argues, cross-dressing in children’s literature often functions less as a subversive act and more as a narrative strategy to access agency within restrictive gender systems. In this specific case study, cross-dressing does not dismantle gender binarism; instead, it paradoxically reinforces it by showing that access to full agency is only possible through the assumption of a male-coded appearance. The protagonists do not question the binary itself, nor do they explore alternative gender identities, rather, they operate within the binary framework, using cross-dressing as a disguise to momentarily bypass its constraints. Once the disguise is removed, the characters are partially repositioned within traditional feminine roles, and their authority is undermined. Yet, despite this reinforcement of binary constructs, the novel still creates meaningful, though not identity-driven, spaces for experimentation. These are not spaces of identity redefinition, but of functional transgression; spaces where the characters, and by extension the readers, are invited to imagine different ways of being and acting in the world.

Crucially, Melisenda never reflects on the cross-dressing episode as a turning point in her own formation: she adopts the disguise with pragmatic ease, chooses the name Federico without apparent conflict, and then effortlessly sets it aside. Her trajectory suggests a different relationship to gender and queerness than Costanza’s since crossdressing is not the temporary assumption of a male identity in order to be free, but a persistent reshaping of what a female identity can be. At the end, Melisenda does not need to cross dress to access spaces of knowledge and adventure; she redefines those spaces from within, without denying her identity. In this sense, her path is arguably the more radical one: it does not borrow male authority to function, but gradually makes female authority legible in domains where it previously had no place. Melisenda’s narrative suggests that it is possible to assert oneself in non-canonical domains without abandoning one’s identity, but by actively reshaping cultural expectations related to a specific gender.

It is also worth noting that *La bambina col falcone* was published in the early 1980s—a historical and cultural context in which gender studies and theories of performativity were already established, though not yet articulated with the same complexity, visibility, or intersectional awareness that characterize contemporary discourse. While the novel may not fully align with contemporary queer or post-binary frameworks, it was nonetheless unconventional for its time, as were many of Pitzorno’s works in their effort to question gender norms.⁵³

In conclusion, narratives are never neutral: they shape both personal and collective imaginaries, construct models—whether empowering or limiting—and educate readers, often in subtle and indirect ways.⁵⁴ *La bambina col falcone* offers a compelling example of how children’s literature can deconstruct

⁵² Ulivieri, *Educazione al femminile*, 15–19.

⁵³ See Earles, “Reading Gender.”

⁵⁴ See Beseghi, “La letteratura per l’infanzia come serbatoio dell’immaginario.”

normative frameworks and open up new spaces for action, imagination, and identification. The female figures portrayed by Pitzorno, with or without the use of cross-dressing, embody a form of resistance that is not rooted in the denial of identity, but in the creative reconfiguration of social roles. These characters do not simply escape the constraints of femininity, they redefine what it means to be female within a patriarchal and historically rigid context. In doing so, it contributes to a broader cultural project of rethinking gender not as a fixed essence, but as a set of roles that can be negotiated, reinterpreted, and—at least partially—resisted. Consequently, Pitzorno's work contributes to the construction of a new imaginary, one in which gender is not a fixed destiny, but a field of possibilities to be explored, negotiated, and redefined.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ See De Laurentis, *Technologies of Gender*.

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