Italian Girlhoods and Other Brilliant Friends
Introduction to the Special Issue

The concept of ‘girlhood’ is just as problematic as the word itself. When it comes to finding a proper Italian translation, for instance, it is almost impossible to identify a term to match the English expression. Besides, the very definition of ‘girlhood’ appears to be subjected to many angles: biological, demographic, cultural and political. As pointed out by Mary Celeste Kearney while discussing the development of girls’ studies as a concrete research field, the last centuries have witnessed a marginalisation of girls with consequent difficulties of girls’ culture to emerge. The topic started to gain popularity in the 1990’s thanks to Angela McRobbie’s work, with a specific look on girls’ culture as a subculture in the international context (McRobbie 1991; McRobbie and Garber 1993).

Studies on girls’ culture and girlhood’s representation related to magazines and new media – such as Susan Driver’s Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media (2007) – paved the way for a more developed analysis on the relationship between female youth, queer and feminist theories.

Paola Bonifazio, Nicoletta Marini-Maio and Ellen Nerenberg published a very relevant study on the topic in the open access journal «Gender/Sexuality/Italy» in 2017, shedding a light for the first time on girl cultures in Italy from Early modern to late capitalism. In their analysis of girlhood the authors focus largely on the cultural context, considering girls as consumers, targets and subjects of cultural productions such as television shows and magazines. From a cultural point of view, the authors observe, girlhood is «not necessarily linked to biological age» (Bonifazio and Others 2017), although the concept becomes relatively more specific when referring to the female coming-of-age process. In this issue, we have agreed to use the term ‘girlhood’ to refer to a liminal stage in a young woman’s life which leads to a final understanding of her identity as a person, although the modes through which this happens may include a wide range of options and modalities.
While this topic has already been explored as regards Italian cinema in the works of Danielle Hipkins and other scholars, there is still space for debate in other fields of representation, as well as for reconsidering a literary genre such the female coming-of-age novel (*Bildungsroman*) which nowadays appears obsolete given the emphasis placed on motherhood and marriage as determinants of a final stage in the development of young female characters (Lazzaro-Weiss 1993).

When it comes to put in relation the field of Italian studies with the topic of girlhood, the scarcity of monographs or collected volumes on the topic is evident; this lack contrasts with the attention that Italian writers and screen players have dedicated to this very topic in recent years, in part encouraged by the international success of Ferrante’s tetralogy and the HBO series based on her books. The interest around the representation of Lenù and Lila’s coming of age in the volumes of *My Brilliant Friend* (2011–2014) inspired us to organise a panel for the conference of the American Association for Italian Studies held in the Spring of 2021. Together with Dr Silvia Ross, we were primarily interested in investigating how the main political and social achievements obtained by women in Italy over the last fifty years have influenced the literary representation of female youth, and – specifically – the *Bildungsroman* as a literary genre. Furthermore, we could not help but notice how the element of female friendship stood out as a *fil rouge* among many coming-of-age stories in contemporary Italian literature. Reading backward through the canon, we found many examples of Italian women writers who introduced female friendship as a crucial element in the characters’ coming-of-age process: voices which had been marginalised by a male-dominated canon and rediscovered today thanks to the attention raised by Ferrante on the topic of ‘girlhood’ and Italian women writers in general. Aiming to give more space to the discussion that took place during the 2021 AAIS Conference, we very much welcomed the invitation of Prof. Tatiana Crivelli to edit this special issue; in doing so, we opened the field of investigation also to other scholars whose expertise included the area of television studies.

This special issue opens with the essay *Dichotomous conceptualisations of female friendship in 20th and 21st century Italian literature – a comparison of Alba de Céspedes, Anna Banti, Elena Ferrante, and Donatella Di*
Pietrantonio, in which Martina Pala drafts an analysis of the female bonds in 20th and 21st century female Italian narrative, considering works by Anna Banti, Alba de Cèspedes, Elena Ferrante and Donatella Di Pietrantonio. Aiming to shed light on a theme such as the conceptualization of female bonds, Pala ascertains that in female friendship the dichotomous conceptualization thrives, but it is also the element that connects the four authors.

In the second contribution, “Non eravamo mica in un romanzo”: Women’s Stories as Inspiration and Education, Brigid Maher delivers a study on Bianca Pitzorno’s Il sogno della macchina da scrivere (2018), a novel that, as Maher writes, «is a homage to reading and the power of education, to female friendship, and to the value of work». By considering the figure of the sartina in other female writers, such as Carolina Invernizio and Charlotte Brönte, the result is an in-depth study of the condition of girls and women as workers in the early twentieth century.

Moreover, in the third essay, Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality in Silvia Avallone’s Acciaio and Un’amicizia, Silvia Ross recognises the topics shared by both of Avallone’s texts, as she begins by examining the areas of «adolescent coming of age, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, the question of social class, and literary setting» and then focuses her analysis «on the girls’ intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings»; in a second part, Ross argues that, as for the Ferrante’s L’amica geniale, patriarchal society has a considerable impact on the friendship between the two female protagonists.

For the fourth contribution, Reading Little Women after the Italian Seventies: the Influence of the Feminist Movement on Lidia Ravera’s Reinterpretation of the Classic, Olga Campofreda conducts a feminist analysis of the Bildungsroman in female Contemporary Italian literature through the analysis of two iconic texts: Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women and Lidia Ravera’s rewriting of the classic. Interpreting the main changes applied by Ravera to Alcott’s story, Campofreda argues that the individualistic turn of the Italian rewriting anticipates the idea of femininity introduced with postfeminist discourse.

Finally, in the last essay Beyond bambole: Female Friendship in Italian Transnational Television, Rebecca Bauman proposes a selection of Italian
television products, such as the adaptation of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels *L’amica geniale*, as well as Netflix’s production *Baby*, and *Skam Italia*. In analysing the tv shows, Bauman traces a link between these different series which revolve around the friendship between adolescent girls, and she advises that female subjectivity might represent «a potential strategy for marketing Italian television worldwide».

While encompassing many differences and angles, all the collected articles endeavour to explore the ways in which female youth has been represented in modern and contemporary Italian cultural production before and after Ferrante’s novels. The idea that female coming-of-age stories have been subjected to several stages in their representation based on the social context, is another – significant – assumption that links these contributions together. Very much aware of the mutual influence between cultural change and the history of (literary) genres, we are convinced that this issue offers new insights on the voices of girls and young women in Italian culture across the decades, shedding a light on those representations in which they are positioned as subjects of their own narratives.

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Notes

4 For what concerns the analysis of girls’ magazines in Italy, also refer to Oscar Ricci’s Ragazze moderne. I magazines femminili per adolescenti in Italia, in «Quaderni di Sociologia», 2021, DOI:10.4000/qds.744. In this article the author considers for the first time the issue of class in the reception of girls’ periodicals.
5 As Catherine O’Rawe has pointed out in her study on Italian cinema, Italians are obsessed with the concept of growing up («popular Italian cinema in the comic mode displays an obsession with maturation and maturity, repeatedly returning to the dreaded necessity of settling down and growing up and detaching oneself from one’s male peer group», O’Rawe 2014: 18), however, it is also true that this has been investigated mainly as regards the male perspective. We therefore refer to Danielle Hipkins’s contributions: Figlie di Papà? Adolescent Girls Between the ‘Incest Motif’ and Female Friendship in Contemporary Italian Film Comedy, in «The Italianist», 35. 2, pp. 248-71, June 2015; The Showgirl Effect: Adolescent Girls and (Percarious) 'Technologies of Sexiness' in Contemporary Italian Cinema, in Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (eds.), International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2016, pp. 21-34.
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