

The Blue Fairy and Wendy Incest, Sacrifice or Feminine Empowerment?

Déborah Lévy-Bertherat
École normale supérieure, Paris, France

Abstract In Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883) and Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911), the little girls' characters – the fairy and Wendy – do grow up, adopting the roles of 'surrogate mothers' for the heroes. Playing the mother to excess, they challenge gender hierarchy. It is therefore less a transgression of rules than it is a subversion of values. Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Peter Pan* (1953) advocate order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood. Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) mitigate gender stereotypes, but the disturbing ambivalence of the girls disappears, in favour of more univocal characters.

Keywords Pinocchio. Peter Pan. Gender. Empowerment. Motherhood. Female education.

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Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted	2021-05-08
Accepted	2021-09-20
Published	2022-03-16

Open access

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Citation Lévy-Bertherat, D. (2021). "The Blue Fairy and Wendy. Incest, Sacrifice or Feminine Empowerment?". *English Literature*, 8, 151-168.

1 Introduction

Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883) and J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911) are two monuments of youth culture heritage, whose male protagonists can be considered iconic representations of eternal childhood – neither of them ever grows up. Although both adventure novels are highly masculine (Collodi's characters being almost exclusively male), it is worth considering their main female characters: Collodi's fairy with “indigo hair”¹ and Barrie's Wendy. In contrast to their masculine heroes, these two little girls do grow up physically and morally, adopting the roles of precocious ‘surrogate mothers’ for the heroes.

At first glance, the ‘little mother’ role seems a *topos* of feminine educational culture; but in both novels, the role masks a transgressive relationship with the main character: playing a mother's part raises questions about child sexuality and incest, and could go as far as shattering masculine authority and the traditional division of gendered tasks. Exactly what kinds of power have been vested in these girls?

Through the motif of the ‘little mother’ in both novels, one may question the relevance of ‘political correctness’ – in other words, the moral and social norms of girlhood – and their transgression at the time of their first release, i.e. at the turn of the 20th Century. As those norms evolved through the first half of the century, how are these characters portrayed in the Disney movies? And what becomes of the young girl characters in the most recent adaptations of these novels for the cinema?

2 The All-Powerful *Bambina* from *Pinocchio*

2.1 An Unusual Family Structure

At the beginning of *Pinocchio*, the family structure is anything but patriarchal. The first three chapters of the story provide him with two fathers: Master Antonio, who supplies the material to make him (the enchanted block of wood, which is also an *anima*) and Geppetto who gives him a form, according to the traditional conception of male and female roles in reproduction. This transmission is accompanied by a fight between the two elderly men, a violent embrace ending in a mutual friendship, which one can interpret as a brutal rep-

¹ “Capelli turchini”. *Turchino* color is a medium blue, and should not be confused with *turchese* (turquoise). Ann Lawson Lucas's translation “indigo hair” also evokes an Oriental origin.

resentation of conception. The paternal couple, perhaps a parody of Christ's dual paternity – Geppetto being a nickname for Giuseppe –, may represent the first transgression in the book. In the exclusively male world of the first fourteen chapters of the novel, Pinocchio can only be a motherless child:² “la mamma non l’ho mai conosciuta” (Collodi 1883, 46) (“I never knew my mama”, Lawson Lucas 2009, 30). Geppetto must carry out the traditional maternal functions: feeding, sewing, clothing, and caring.

From her first appearance in chapter XV, the “little Fairy with indigo hair” will adopt the puppet and assume a maternal role towards him. Pinocchio’s father and ‘mother’ never meet. As underlined by Jean-Marie Apostolides (1989, 23), they belong to separate and even opposite spheres. Geppetto’s realistic world was marked by poverty, hard work and sacrifice. In contrast, the realm of the fairy is a space of fantasy, enchantment and effortless abundance. Geppetto’s male education was weak and ineffective; whereas the fairy’s severe and sometime cruel lessons lead the puppet to a certain moral progress, albeit temporary.

2.2 The Weak Masculine and All-Powerful Feminine?

The “bella Bambina dai capelli turchini” (Collodi 1883, 71) (“beautiful Little Girl, with indigo hair”, Lawson Lucas 2009, 46) appears only in the middle of the novel (ch. XV), in the climactic scene of the hanging, where Collodi temporarily interrupts the action. A dead little girl with a waxy face, she shows up at the window of a seemingly empty house where Pinocchio seeks help when assassins chase him through the woods. She cruelly leaves him to die by hanging, only to save him later; this back and forth between abandonment and rescue will be carried on throughout the following chapters. The little fairy will re-emerge in various and mysterious forms: a charitable lady, a circus spectator, a goat, with only the persistent characteristic of her blue hair allowing Pinocchio to recognise her.

Her initial link with death remains constant throughout the novel; the little fairy belongs to an unreal world, she has the metamorphosis ability of a ghost. The childish appearance under which she first appears disguises her saintly identity of millennial, perhaps even immortal fairy:

la Bambina dai capelli turchini non era altro, in fin dei conti, che una buonissima Fata, che da più di mill’anni abitava nelle vicinanze di quel bosco. (Collodi 1883, 72)

² “Pinocchio is not merely the type of the motherless child; he is a foundling” (Perella 1986, 27).

the Girl with indigo hair was really none other than a very good Fairy, who had lived beside that wood for more than a thousand years. (Lawson Lucas 2009, 49)

Although she appears, in chapters XV to XVIII, under the aspect of a *bambina*, she already possesses an adult's authority and power over the child-puppet who becomes her pupil in every meaning of the word.

The omnipotence of the fairy is diametrically opposed to the impotence of Geppetto: she is as rich as he is poor, she is obeyed by enchanted animals, she imposes over the puppet an authority of which his father is incapable. She summons three illustrious doctors – raven, owl and cricket – all male but, after having heard their opinions, she totally ignores them. It is she alone who will resuscitate the marionette:

- Dunque la mia medicina t'ha fatto bene davvero?
- Altro che bene! Mi ha rimesso al mondo! (Collodi 1883, 81)

'So my medicine really did you good?'
'Never mind good, it put me back to life'. (Lawson Lucas 2009, 56)

As in English *medicine*, the Italian word *medicina* can refer either to her *remedy* or to her *medical science*. It is noteworthy that the medical effectiveness of the little fairy is expressed through a maternal image: she literally gives him life again, re-births him.

From chapter XVI to XVIII, while hosting the puppet, the little fairy combines the functions of curing (medical) and caring (maternal): she takes Pinocchio "up in her arms" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) ("lo prese in collo", Collodi 1883, 74) like an infant and treats him "lovingly" ("amorosamente", Collodi 1883, 77), "with all the patience of a good mother" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 54) ("con tutta la pazienza di una buona mamma", Collodi 1883, 78). But she alternates her gentleness with a cruel pedagogy: when the puppet refuses his medication, four black rabbits bring a coffin for him.

Although systematically referred to as *buona*, the fairy is an ambivalent and fearsome figure, capable of giving life or death. As early as chapter XVI, she accommodates Pinocchio in two different places that symbolise, in a complementary way, the feminine and the maternal, but are also equivocal, as they announce dangerous episodes in the rest of the novel. First, the carriage in which she gets an unconscious Pinocchio transported is "lined inside with whipped cream and wafers and custard" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) ("foderata nell'interno di panna montata e di crema coi savoiardi", Collodi 1883, 74). It represents an ideally unctuous sweetness, but perhaps prefig-

ures the fatal coach of the *Omino* (Little Man),³ leading to the *Paese dei Balocchi* (Land of Toys) where Pinocchio will be transformed into a donkey. The second space is the room in which the fairy cares for Pinocchio: “a bedroom which had walls of mother-of-pearl” (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) (“una cameretta che aveva le pareti di madreperla”, Collodi 1883, 74). The *mother-of-pearl* is not only a precious material, it also carries significant references. The word connotes motherhood both in English and Italian, and it also likens the room to the interior of a shell – an animal, marine and uterine place, foreshadowing the shark’s belly, another episode of near-death and rebirth.

2.3 “Puberty” of the Fairy and the Temptation of Incest

Throughout chapters XV to XVIII, although she acts as a surrogate mother, the fairy remains a *bambina*. Regarding her age, the interpretations of the novel’s first illustrators, Mazzanti and Chiostrì,⁴ obviously differ, although neither of them gives her the aspect of a little girl. The former portrays her as a teenager of unspecified age, whereas the latter distinctly represents her as an adult woman, albeit with her hair loose like a young girl [figs 1-2].

The text, however, insists on the *equal childhood* of the fairy and the marionette, both being referred to by diminutives: “tu sarai il mio fratellino e io la tua buona sorellina” (Collodi 1883, 84) (“you shall be my little brother and I shall be your good little sister”, Lawson Lucas 2009, 58). In Chapter XXIII, when Pinocchio returns and finds a tomb instead of the fairy’s house, she is still identified as a child (*bambina*) and Pinocchio as her brother (*fratellino*):

QUI GIACE
LA BAMBINA DAI CAPELLI TURCHINI
MORTA DI DOLORE
PER ESSERE STATA ABBANDONATA DAL SUO
FRATELLINO PINOCCHIO
(Collodi 1883, 112)

HERE LIES
THE GIRL WITH THE INDIGO HAIR
WHO DIED OF GRIEF
HAVING BEEN ABANDONED BY HER

³ “Figuratevi un omino più largo che lungo, tenero e untuoso come una palla di burro” (Collodi 1883, 171).

⁴ Veronica Bonanni, “La Fata illustrata. Donna, fata e diva” (<http://www.arabeschi.it/12-la-fata-illustrata-donna-fata-e-diva/>).



Figure 1 Enrico Mazzanti, illustration for Collodi, C. (1883). *Le avventure di Pinocchio*. Firenze: Felice Paggi. Public domain

Figure 2 Carlo Chiostri, illustration for Collodi, C. (1901). *Le avventure di Pinocchio*. Firenze: Bemporad e Figlio. Public domain

LITTLE BROTHER PINOCCHIO (Lawson Lucas 2009, 78)

Her death, caused by abandonment, reveals a bond of love that goes beyond that of siblings' ordinary attachment. But it is in the following chapter in particular that their relationship will take an incestuous turn. The fairy reappears in the guise of "a nice little woman" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 87) ("una buona donnina", Collodi 1883, 124) who feeds the hungry puppet. In this new adult persona, the fairy designates herself as the possible mother of the marionette, and the diminutive *donnina* is soon replaced by *donna*:

Mi lasciasti bambina, e ora mi ritrovi donna; tanto donna, che potrei quasi farti da mamma.

— E io l'ho caro di molto, perché così, invece di sorellina, vi chiamerò la mia mamma. Gli è tanto tempo che mi struggo di avere una mamma come tutti gli altri ragazzi! (Collodi 1883, 128)

'When you left, I was a little girl, and now you have found me again, I'm a woman; so much so that I could almost be your mother.'

'I like that very much, because instead of calling you little sister, I shall call you my mama. I've been longing to have a mother like all the other boys for such a long time!' (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90)

The sudden puberty of the fairy inspires in Pinocchio the desire to grow up as well, but she reminds him of his hopeless existence as a marionette:

- vorrei crescere un poco anch'io. [...]
- Ma tu non puoi crescere — replicò la Fata.
- Perché?
- Perché i burattini non crescono mai. Nascono burattini, vivono burattini e muoiono burattini. (Collodi 1883, 128-9)

I wish I could grow a bit too. [...]
'But you can't grow,' replied the Fairy.
'Why not?'
'Because puppets don't ever grow. They are born puppets, live as puppets and die puppets' (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90)

From Pinocchio's desire to grow, undoubtedly motivated by his love for the fairy, comes the desire for his metamorphosis into a being of flesh. But it should be noted that here there is no intention to become "a boy" (*un ragazzino*):⁵ Pinocchio's wish is to be transformed immediately from puppet to *man*: "It's time I too became a man" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90) ("Sarebbe ora che diventassi anch'io un uomo", Collodi 1883, 129). Collodi plays on the ambiguity of the word *uomo*, human and adult male, like the word *man* in English.

2.4 The Ultimate Sacrifice Demanded by the Fairy

Unlike Peter Pan, Pinocchio wants to grow up, precisely to escape a fixed childhood that would be death itself. Peter Pan invents and leads the game of eternal childhood, whereas the puppet has become, ironically, its toy. He discovers himself locked in a tragic cycle where he will be forever trapped, deceived, killed and resurrected. He does not want, as the fairy says, "to die a puppet". The contract imposed by the fairy defines her absolute authority as strictly maternal: "Now I'll be your Mama [...] You will always be obedient and do what I tell you to" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 91) ("Io sarò la tua mamma [...] Tu mi ubbidirai e farai sempre quello che ti dirò io", Collodi 1883, 130). To become a man means to submit to a feminine protection that will accompany the adventures of the marionette, as Athena to Telemachus, but without the male guise of Mentor.

After repeatedly allowing the marionette to brush with death in order to teach him life lessons, the fairy demands one last sacrifice.

⁵ "Voglio diventare un ragazzino perbene" (Collodi 1883, 129).

Leading him to believe that she is lying destitute, sick, and miserable in the hospital, she convinces the once lazy child to promise that he will serve as a caregiver, working day and night to nurture his father and herself. Pinocchio wears himself out to earn a glass of milk that he gives to his Geppetto. This symbolic breastfeeding with the 'milk of human kindness' makes him the nurturer of his own father, in a hut provided by the blue goat, the nurturing animal *par excellence* – and avatar of the Mother Fairy.⁶ Motherhood is the key to metamorphosis: the marionette must exercise a maternal role to access humanity.

3 Wendy: From Servitude to Empowerment

Barrie's novel's original title,⁷ *Peter and Wendy*, suggests that equal roles were attributed to the hero and the heroine. Also, the first three chapters of *Peter and Wendy*, devoted to the Darling family, feature the girl prominently (her conception, her birth, her early years), and Peter does not appear until chapter III.

3.1 The Darling Family: A Matriarchy?

The Darling family, on which the novel *Peter and Wendy* opens, is more traditional in appearances than is Pinocchio's. But this normality is immediately subverted: Mr. Darling is an inconsequential and infantilised father – "Father's a cowardly custard" (Barrie 1911, 27). Like all the male characters in the novel, including Hook and Peter of course, Mr. Darling is an eternal child.

On the title page illustration of the original 1911 edition, F.D. Bedford features all the characters in one scene. The Darling family sits at the bottom, in an unusual male and female family distribution: on the left side, the mother with her sons, Michael sitting on her lap. On the right side, the father leans back as his daughter threatens him with a bottle of medicine – another typically maternal attribute that she has in common with Collodi's little fairy. The collapse of the patriarchal family order is already announced.

More generally, one can detect in Barrie's novel the reflection of a crisis of masculinity: according to J.A. Mangan (1987), at the end of the Victorian era (which takes its name from an almost divinised queen-

⁶ Pinocchio thus overcomes the curse of the "little man [...] whose appearance was all milk and honey" ("L'Omino [...] che aveva la fisionomia tutta latte e miele", Collodi 1883, 189).

⁷ It was also a way to distinguish it from the pre-text *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, published in 1906.

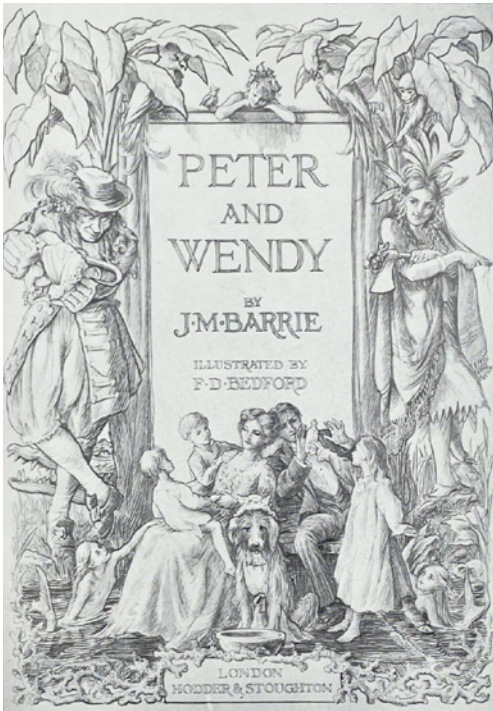


Figure 3

F.D. Bedford, title page for Barrie, J.M. (1911). *Peter and Wendy*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. Public domain

mother), the man is *puer aeternus*. Do only women become adults? Mrs. Darling is the true head of the family (“her mother was the chief one”, Barrie 1911, 1); the mother knows everything and sees everything. At night, she lurks in her children’s minds. The night lights are her eyes constantly watching: “they are the eyes a mother leaves behind her to guard her children” (Barrie 1911, 32). The maternal omniscience, reminiscent of that of Pinocchio’s fairy, is abusive and disturbing.

Both in London and in Neverland, Wendy plays games in which she takes on the role of mother, and which are tinged with incest. She and her brother, John, pretend to be their own parents experiencing the birth of their children: “I am happy to inform you, Mrs. Darling, that you are now a mother” (21). This incestuous game extends to Neverland, where Peter takes the role of the father, while the Lost Boys and Wendy’s brothers are their children. Peter, however, feels only filial feelings for Wendy (“a devoted son”, 159), while she is actually in love with him.

Moreover, by acting as the mother of her own brothers, Wendy implicitly becomes the wife of her own father.⁸ Hook, who intends to se-

⁸ “It is too easy to give an Oedipal reading of *Peter Pan*” (Rose 1984, 35).

duce the little girl, is also a father figure: in the play, which pre-existed the novel, the roles of Mr. Darling and Hook were played by the same actor. Incest is further complicated here by paedophilic overtones.

3.2 The Little Mother, Between Games and Sacrifice

Although Neverland is dominated by male figures and games, it is questionable to interpret it as a domain of the patriarchal order, as Heather Shipley⁹ does. An imaginary family forms on the island around Wendy, who must fill the absence of the mother figure for the Lost Boys. In the underground house, she becomes, like Snow White among the dwarves, a willing little slave:

there were whole weeks when, except perhaps with a stocking in the evening, she was never above ground. The cooking, I can tell you, kept her nose to the pot. [...] Wendy's favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed. Then, as she expressed it, she had a breathing time for herself; and she occupied it in making new things for them. (114)

The words describing Wendy's play are very similar to those used by Barrie in his mother Margaret Ogilvy's biography, *Margaret Ogilvy by Her Son* (Barrie 1896). He paints a striking picture of Margaret Ogilvy's childhood, in which she not only takes on the full range of domestic and maternal tasks, but finds pleasure in them:

She was eight when her mother's death made her mistress of the house and mother to her little brother, and from that time she scrubbed and mended and baked and sewed, [...] and she carried the water from the pump, and had her washing-days and her ironings and a stocking always on the wire for odd moments, [...] – all these things she did as a matter of course, leaping joyful from bed in the morning because there was so much to do, doing it as thoroughly and sedately as if the brides were already due for a lesson, and then rushing out in a fit of childishness to play dumps or parlalays with others of her age. (Barrie 1896, 28-9)

Was the writer inspired by a story told by Margaret herself? Or did he imagine his own mother predestined to motherhood since child-

⁹ “The childhood tale of Peter Pan, Neverland and the Lost Boys mirrors the hegemonic normalcy of economic trade created by men to exchange ‘goods’ (women as a guise for maintaining the narcissistic nature of the sociocultural order through desired homosocial relations)” (Shipley 2012, 146).

hood? The ease and even enjoyment of the little girl in the servitude of housework differs from Wendy's case, however, in one essential respect. For the young Margaret, there was a space for childish freedom (or at least her son imagined it that way). For Wendy, on the contrary, the only moment of leisure is still devoted to work: work *is* play, and her enjoyment is paradoxically found in the excess of toil, in exhaustion. She pushes to the extreme the imitation of the mother of a large family overwhelmed by her children. The play loses its lightheartedness and becomes a masochistic trap; it never ends.

In the eyes of a contemporary reader, the pleasure the little girl takes in assuming maternal servitude to the point of sacrifice seems to represent an outdated upbringing of girls. In reality, Wendy's masochism goes far beyond what was socially acceptable in 1911. Why did Barrie make it so extreme?

3.3 “Frightfully Fascinating”: The Little Mother and Death

To the Lost Boys who beg her to be their mother, Wendy responds by reminding that she is “only a little girl”:

Then all went on their knees, and holding out their arms cried, ‘O Wendy lady, be our mother.’

‘Ought I?’ Wendy said, all shining. ‘Of course it’s frightfully fascinating, but you see I am only a little girl. I have no real experience.’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Peter, as if he were the only person present who knew all about it, though he was really the one who knew least. ‘What we need is just a nice motherly person’. (Barrie 1911, 107)

Playing mother is more than an ordinary game: the simulacrum touches the sacred, vital stake of existence. For Wendy, it is an adventure as fascinating and dangerous as death is for Peter. Like the mother-of-pearl room of Pinocchio's fairy, the Lost Boys' underground house is both tomb and womb.

We know Barrie was inspired by the death of his older brother David at age thirteen, to write about the child who never grew up (Ridley 2016, 28-9). But Wendy is also inspired by a dead child; her name was invented by the author as a tribute to Margaret, daughter of his friend William Ernest Henley, who died at age six. The girl used to be called Barrie “my friendly”, mispronounced “fWendy”. Besides, Wendy bears two ominous middle names, Moira and Angela, associating her with the Fates (*fata*) and the Angels, and hence with death. When Wendy reaches Neverland, she is struck by an arrow and seems to fall dead. The Lost Boys mourn her and build a little tomb-house for

her, from which she sings. This episode recalls the first appearance of the fairy as a talking dead girl at the window of a ghostly house.

The importance of needlework in her activities as a little mother also associates her with the figures of the Fates - her first gesture towards Peter is to sew up his shadow, i.e., symbolically, to re-connect him to life. In Neverland, she will mend the boys' clothes, a task that accompanies her tales and the questionnaires she invents to resurrect their memories. By all means, her point is to re-member.

Wendy sacrifices herself for her "sons", but she will demand from them a sacrifice to their motherland in the name of maternal love:

At this moment Wendy was grand.' These are my last words, dear boys,' she said firmly. I feel that I have a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this: 'We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen'. (Barrie 1911, 210-11)

Masculine heroism depends on feminine empowerment.

It should be noted that, for the two authors, the sacrifice required of the son is not the same. For the Collodi, it is that of labour, in a book designed to instil the values of hard work in poor children; in Barrie's novel, it is that of life itself, in a motto directed towards the generation of the future soldiers of the Great War (Robertson 2008). Indeed, the call of the motherland, as a symbolic mother, will return in the propaganda of the Great War and Barrie will be enlisted by the War Propaganda Bureau (Feldmeyer 2017).

4 The Disney Versions: "Politically Corrected" Tales?

Disney's *Pinocchio* (1941) and *Peter Pan* (1953) have replaced Collodi's and Barrie's novels in the canon of youth culture. What may have seemed transgressive in the family and gender configurations of the two original works has been made socially acceptable and consistent with a conservative and conformist morality.

4.1 *Pinocchio* (1940)

In Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen's *Pinocchio*, the fairy emerges from a star at the beginning of the film, a beautiful blond woman dressed in pale blue, winged and haloed like a Virgin Mary, to answer Geppetto's prayer. Thus, a platonic parental couple with well-defined roles is formed from the outset. In his TV series *Pinocchio* of 1974, Comencini will then go so far as to marry them, making the fairy the deceased wife of Geppetto.

As the benevolent fairy godmother, Disney's "Blue Fairy" loses all mystery and ambivalence. She intervenes only twice to save Pinocchio: once in Stromboli's cage, then at the very end to resurrect him (that last time she remains invisible, present only in the luminous halo and the beautiful deep voice of Evelyn Venable). Throughout the rest of the film, Disney tones down the female empowerment of the novel by replacing her with her male side-kick, Jiminy Cricket. Endowed by the fairy to be the puppet's "official conscience", the Cricket behaves as the hero's Doppelgang soul (Jiminy/Gemini) guardian angel and moral guide, in a Christian perspective.

4.2 *Peter Pan* (1953)

In Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske's *Peter Pan* (1953) – see Ohmer 2009 – the father is less of a caricature than in the novel. As in the play, Mr. Darling and Hook are modelled and voiced by the same actor, Hans Conried, as grotesque and vain characters. But the father is notably redeemed by the end, where the Darlings (except for the sons) appear through the window: the father stands in the middle, much taller than the mother, and lays a protective hand on the shoulders of his wife and daughter, physically expressing his domination over the three females of the household: his wife, Wendy and Nana. The patriarchal order is obviously restored.

However, the biggest change is in the relationship between Peter and Wendy. In the play, as in the silent movie by Herbert Brennon (1924), Peter's role was always played by an actress (Tuite 2008, 105-7). The kissing exchanges between him and Wendy became homoerotic scenes whose subversive character did not seem to strike the censors. Disney, for the first time, masculinises the character by choosing teenager Bobby Driscoll, who had performed the role on TV (The Walt Disney Christmas Show), as a close-up model and voice actor. Disney ages the two characters ("Young lady, this is your last night in the nursery"), making them young adolescents whose romance is no longer suggestive of childhood sexuality. One may wonder whether the crocodile, who was female in Barrie's novel but now male (he), still evokes the fantasy of the '*vagina dentata*'?

5 Recent Reinterpretations in Films

Interestingly, two of the most recent adaptations of *Peter Pan* and *Pinocchio* for the cinema give a new insight on both of the young girl characters: Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020). Despite their very different aesthetic and ideological approaches, these films both choose to focus on the young female character. But what do these directors' choices really mean?

5.1 Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019)

Matteo Garrone's version of *Pinocchio* seems to have been the first to entrust the role of the Fairy with indigo hair to a very young girl (Alida Baldari Calabria, ten or eleven years old at the time it was filmed). This choice allows him to mark, as with Collodi, the evolution of the fairy, who has suddenly become an adult at the time of her second encounter with the puppet. But the interest of the novel's character lay in the contrast between her childish appearance and her authority towards the puppet, her servants or the doctors; her hieratic, solemn, mature figure, was in contradiction with her age.

After the episodes of *Pinocchio*'s illness and the lengthening of his nose, Garrone inserts a kind of gratuitous interlude. The fairy plays hide-and-seek with him, they lie in her bed while the *lumaca* (she-snail) reads to them, or take a ride on the snail's back. The mother - or nanny's - role is obviously held by the she-snail, who in the novel doesn't appear before chapter XXIX. By putting the girl and the puppet on the same level of childhood and amusement, Garrone seems to have wanted to soften the severe figure of the little fairy, at the risk of making her lose all her gravity and her disturbing intensity. The episode of the fairy's grave and its guilt-inducing epitaph, a key scene in Comencini's TV series, has been removed.

5.2 Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020)

Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) seems to be the first, amongst the innumerable movies adapted from Barrie's novel and play, to focus on the hero's female counterpart. Instead of London, Zeitlin's movie sets the beginning of the story in contemporary Louisiana, where the matriarchal Darling family (grand-mother, mother and daughter, no male adults are ever mentioned) runs a shabby diner near a railroad. But Wendy's role as the elder sister of two brothers in Barrie's fable is reversed in the movie: the heroine (played by Devin Frances) has two older twin brothers Doug and James. Zeitlin thus displaces the twin motif from Barrie's Lost Boys group. Although Wendy, according to

the novel, is the first to answer Peter's call and follow him to Neverland, her buoyant and athletic and boisterous brothers are obviously drawn to the adventure even before Peter's call.

Neverland is a hostile volcanic island (the movie was shot on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, whose capital has become a ghost town since 1995 after it was destroyed by eruptions). Once on the island, Wendy remains the only girl among the group of lost children, but her role becomes secondary compared to Peter's magical power and to her brothers' dramatic fate - James ageing prematurely and becoming captain James Hook. Young actor Yashua Mack, who plays Peter, looks much younger than the other children, including Wendy. In his previous movie, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), Zeitlin celebrates a young girl's heroism in six-year-old Hushpuppy. In *Wendy*, the girl alone cannot accomplish any heroic deeds, she can only inspire the boys. The attempt to focus on the female character to offer a contemporary, even feminist, version of the fable, is therefore deceiving.

Zeitlin's modernisation of the tale also concerns the reversal of the colonial vision underlying *Peter Pan*, an almost all-male all-white fable in which Native Americans are ridiculed as the Picaninny tribe. Peter's role is played by young Antiguan actor Yashua Mack, and a majority of the Lost Boys are also of African descent. But the audacity of the transformation is, again, disappointing, as Zeitlin could be criticised (Bramescio 2020) for falling into another stereotype: confining black children to the wild side. Furthermore, the "first black Peter" is clearly no longer the hero of the story.¹⁰ While Zeitlin may be trying to be 'politically correct' by giving the starring roles to minorities, he has, in fact, created the opposite effect.

Another disappointing twist comes at the end of the film; the mother theme takes a dramatic turn from Barrie's tale to Zeitlin's movie, losing its original subversive strength. Barrie had enhanced Peter's diffidence, even hatred, of mothers,¹¹ which Wendy desperately tried to contradict. In contrast, Zeitlin's Peter saves the children by leading them to repeat after him the motto "I love my mother", until a gigantic luminous fish called Mother, injured by Hook, is healed by their love and comes back to life.

10 "Wendy' flirts a little too brazenly, for my taste, with the stereotype of the magical black man, the figure who props up and mystically empowers the story's white protagonists" (Chang 2020).

11 Céline-Albin Faivre mentions a draft in which Barrie planned to make Mrs. Darling the real mother of Peter, who had forgotten his existence (Faivre 2012).

6 Conclusion

Could these little girls' characters, who figure alongside male protagonists at the turn of the century, embody a type of feminine power? By playing the role of mothers, they are doing more than simply anticipating their future social function. To play the mother is to tell stories, to sew and mend, to nurse, to care, and to clean. It is even, symbolically, to give birth. The Bambina/Fata and Wendy do not disrupt the normalised distribution of roles and ideally perform all these tasks, but they overdo them. It is therefore less a transgression of rules than it is a subversion of values: playing the mother to excess, to the point of shattering the role, they challenge gender hierarchy. The cases of the little Fairy and Wendy consequently lead to a kind of axiological dead end. It is difficult to assign an educational value to these characters or to consider them as models. They push the maternal function to the point of *hubris* (Lévy-Bertherat 2020) and could hardly constitute models of "little mommies" like those offered, for example, by the Countess of Ségur (Heywood 2020, 120-2).

The end of both novels may seem disappointing in their return to order: human Pinocchio loses his marionette's fantasy, and the fairy, now useless, leaves him some gold coins and disappears. Wendy re-enters the cycle of time and generations that Neverland had temporarily allowed her to escape. The Disney films extend throughout the entire length of the films the triumph of such values as order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood. As for Garrone's and Zeitlin's films, they emphasise the little girl figures and mitigate gender stereotypes related to the little mother game. But in both films, the disturbing ambivalence of the young girl playing the role of a sacrificial and sacrificing mother disappears, in favor of more univocal and innocent characters.

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