Bad Mothers and Female Antagonists. Gender constructs and maternal roles in the *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* sagas
Cattive madri e antagoniste. Costrutti di genere e ruoli materni nelle saghe di *Harry Potter* e *Queste oscure materie*

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ABSTRACT

The construction of maternal characters in children's literature is strongly influenced by both gender canons and the roles these characters play within the story, resulting in different interpretations of motherhood, often structured around two poles: 'good' mothers or 'bad' mothers, sacrificial mothers or absent and uncaring mothers, ideal mothers or cruel stepmothers. With some exceptions, motherhood often involves a gendered 'judgment' that is transformed into a judgmental view of the maternal role: the 'good' mothers (who are often the mothers of the heroes and heroines) are figures who adhere to the feminine canon, who are well grounded in the domestic sphere and deeply devoted to nurturing; in contrast, female characters who are outside the canon abandon motherhood or perform it according to new paradigms that do not adhere to social norms, thus becoming the mothers of the antagonists or the antagonists themselves. The essay aims to explore how gender identity, narrative roles, and motherhood intersect through different strategies, leading non-canonical female portraits to 'deviant' forms of motherhood. Specific case studies will be examined, namely some 'negative' mothers from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*.

KEYWORDS
Motherhood, gender, antagonist, children's literature, fantasy.
Maternità, genere, antagonista, letteratura per l'infanzia, letteratura fantasy.

La costruzione dei personaggi materni nella letteratura per l'infanzia è strettamente influenzata sia dai canoni di genere, sia dai ruoli svolti all'interno della storia, portando così a diverse interpretazioni della maternità, strutturata spesso su due poli: madri 'buone' o madri 'cattive', madri dedite al sacrificio o madri assenti e noncuranti, madri ideali o matrigne crudeli. Con le dovute eccezioni, la maternità è spesso correlata a un 'giudizio' di genere che si trasforma in un giudizio sul ruolo materno: le buone madri (spesso madri degli eroi e delle eroine) sono personaggi aderenti al canone femminile, ben inserite nella sfera domestica e profondamente dedite alla cura; al contrario, i personaggi femminili fuori dal canone abbandonano la maternità o la performano secondo nuovi paradigmi non aderenti alle norme sociali, divenendo quindi le madri degli antagonisti o esse stesse antagoniste. Il saggio vuole esplorare come, tramite strategie diverse, il genere, i ruoli narrativi e la maternità si intreccino portando i ritratti femminili non canonici a forme di maternità deviante. Per farlo, verranno presi in analisi dei casi di studio specifici, ovvero alcune madri della saga di *Harry Potter* di J.K. Rowling e di *Queste oscure materie* di Philip Pullman.

1. Introduction

The representation of female portraits in children's literature has been the subject of numerous academic studies. One area of particular interest is the gendered representation of mothers (Bernardi, 2011; Biemmi, 2015; Trisciuzzi, 2018; Forni, 2022). Mothers in children's literature, with specific reference to fairy tales and classics (Trisciuzzi, 2018; Ulivieri, 1999; Zipes, 1985), are frequently depicted as benevolent and protective figures, willing to make sacrifices for their children (Alston, 2008; Coats, Fraustino, 2015). The archetypal mother is juxtaposed with malevolent female figures who are unable to care for the young protagonists, such as cruel stepmothers or women who reject motherhood. It is not uncommon for these characters, although they are of secondary importance, to play a significant role in the development of the plot. They indirectly convey specific patterns and prejudices to the reader. With due exceptions, the representation of the mother is often related to a "judgment" about how motherhood and gender identity are interpreted and performed. This judgment then translates into a precise role played by the character within the narrative. Good mothers (often mothers of heroes and heroines) are characters that adhere to the female canon, are well embedded in the domestic sphere, and are deeply devoted to care. In contrast, female characters outside the canon abandon motherhood or perform it according to new paradigms that do not adhere to social standards, thus becoming the mothers of antagonists or villains themselves.

The *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling (1997-2007) and *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman (1995-2000) have been extensively discussed in terms of the different female representations proposed (Whited, 2004; Cherland, 2008; Weaver, McMahon-Coleman, 2012). The focus from a gender perspective has been mainly on female protagonists; however, some secondary characters, including mothers, also raise several issues worthy of analysis. The two works constitute an interesting study sample as they represent two of the most celebrated fantasy sagas of the last decades and are therefore able to demonstrate some of the most recent trends in the representation of the maternal within this literary genre (Barsotti, Cantatore, 2018; Grandi, 2006).

The image of the mother and its positive or negative connotations do not remain mere representations; rather, they move from the fictional to the real, a process that characterizes all literature, including fantasy literature. As Emy Beseghi notes, «Il 'fantastico' e il 'meraviglioso' non sono evasioni dalla realtà ma interpretazioni di essa. Come le fiabe e le leggende, il meraviglioso possiede una dimensione sacra, universale» (2007, p. 12).

In Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, the narrative follows the adventures of Lyra Belacqua, an 11-year-old girl, as she embarks on a journey north to rescue children who have been kidnapped and used for experiments, as well as to unravel the mystery of the origin of Dust and the existence of other worlds. In the *Harry Potter* series, we accompany the protagonist, Harry Potter, a young orphan who was raised by his cruel uncles. As he matures, Harry must confront not only the typical challenges of adolescence (Cagnolati, 2020) but also the evil wizard Lord Voldemort. In both sagas, the mother figures are secondary characters, though they are not less important. The presence and absence of the mother are fundamental both in these works.

Although it is not possible to create a rigorous and exhaustive taxonomy of mothers in literature, and more specifically in the two selected sagas, it is possible to identify some recurring traits and archetypes. These traits and archetypes often create oppositions that are anchored in the canon of fairy tales and folktales. For example, the mother is often opposed to the figure of the stepmother, two characters who embody sharply contrasting narrative and gender roles. This opposition is a recurring theme in literature.

The representations of motherhood will be classified here according to opposition and compared with each other in a kind of spectrum between "good" and "bad" mothers, as defined by traditional social and gender standards. The portrayal of mothers will be integrated with their roles in the plot, thus demonstrating how frequently the motherhood performed by antagonists deviates from the more conventional motherhood exemplified by positive characters. The initial assumption is that a negative mother will correspond to a negative role within the narrated events, while a positive mother will be a positive character. The objective is to gain insight into the diverse portrayals of motherhood and womanhood in the two sagas through an exploratory and comparative investigation, which could then be expanded to encompass other literary works.

In particular, the following oppositions will be considered: ideal mothers and evil non-mothers; loving mothers and indifferent mothers; good antagonistic mothers and cruel stepmothers. A total of two mothers from the universe created by Philip Pullman and seven in relation to J.K. Rowling's saga, which contains a higher number of mother figures, were considered.

2. Ideal mothers and evil non-mothers

The initial two maternal models under consideration are based on a strict opposition: the ideal mother and the evil non-mother. The former represents the epitome of motherhood, embodying all its endowments, while the latter is a woman who, since she has no children, is perceived as lacking in kindness and benevolence towards others and assumes the role of antagonist.

In the *Harry Potter* series, the ideal mother is represented by Lily Evans Potter, the mother of the protagonist. Lily makes the ultimate sacrifice for her son, selflessly giving her life to protect him from Lord Voldemort's attack. Although Harry's father, James Potter, also perishes in this episode, it is the maternal sacrifice that achieves a symbolic, magical potential. Lily's act of self-sacrifice will serve as a protective shield for Harry throughout his life, thereby legitimizing her status as an angelic figure with a saving function (Di Cesare, 2015). In addition to representing the epitome of maternal virtue, Lily also symbolizes the archetypal woman in that she is kind, beautiful, and virtuous. As will be demonstrated, the aesthetic canon frequently functions as a visual indicator of the moral beauty of characters. Consequently, depictions of bad mothers and women are often accompanied by an aesthetically unpleasant visual representation.

The ideal mother is thus opposed to the evil non-mother, represented in the saga by the dark witch Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix can be contrasted with Lily in that she lacks the maternal instincts and exhibits a clear disdain for the idea of having a family. Bellatrix is a complex character, displaying a strong, independent personality driven by courage and determination, as well as a desire for power that she often seeks to acquire through violence. The witch has no family except, if we expand this term, for her blind loyalty to Lord Voldemort. It is evident that Bellatrix would be willing to sacrifice her children for Voldemort, as she herself states. This contrasts with the character of Lily, who sacrifices her life for her family, while Bellatrix would rather sacrifice her children for her own ideals. In opposition to Lily, Bellatrix is depicted as a beautiful woman who has been deteriorated by imprisonment and hatred. This has resulted in her face becoming hollow and bony, taking her out of aesthetic norms. Bellatrix thus represents a deviation from canonical gender norms and serves as one of the saga's primary antagonists. The portrayal of the strong and independent woman, yet lonely, without family affection or ties, is a common trope in children's narratives. This depiction creates a polarization between motherhood and self-determination, suggesting that loneliness is necessary for autonomy. Additionally, the narrative assumption that non-maternal women are evil and therefore negative characters is a common trope in children's narratives (Forni, 2022).

3. Lovely mothers and indifferent mothers

A second pairing regarding the portrayal of the maternal in the two sagas is based on the contrast between loving mothers and indifferent mothers. The former are depicted as naturally affectionate, inclined to care, and pleasantly devoted to raising and protecting their children. In contrast, the latter are considered "unnatural" in that they are incapable of loving their children and showing affection.

One of the clearest examples of a loving mother is Molly Prewett Weasley, who represents the archetype of maternal love. The Weasleys, and particularly Molly, extend their family by welcoming Harry as a kind of adopted son, thereby providing him with the love he did not receive from his uncle and aunt. Molly is depicted as a positive character, capable of unconditional love for her children, regardless of their biological or extended family status (Di Cesare, 2015). The Weasleys are also portrayed as a traditional family in terms of parental roles. The woman is described as a housewife devoted to raising their seven children and is therefore mostly situated within enclosed spaces, at home. Her husband, Arthur, is portrayed as a busy worker, although he is never described as a neglectful or absent father. Molly's appearance also echoes traditional maternal portraits, for instance through the symbol of the apron (Rowling, 1999, p. 38).

In *His Dark Materials*, the role of the loving mother is represented by Ma Costa, a strong, courageous, and wise gypsy woman. She is physically imposing and embodies gender ideals that deviate from traditional norms without becoming a "bad" mother. This character assumes a maternal role, demonstrating love and protection towards Lyra. While Lyra is still a baby, she is nursed and safeguarded from external dangers by Ma, and this care is provided with the same dedication as if Lyra were the character's biological daughter. Similarly to Molly, Ma makes no distinction between biological and foster maternal bonding. Indeed, when Lyra is taken by her father to the college where she will be raised, Ma makes herself available to provide further care for her, although this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the woman maintains a close relationship with Lyra without disclosing the circumstances surrounding her own upbringing. This demonstrates a genuine and sincere love for Lyra. The narrative arc also demonstrates the continuity of Ma's commitment to Lyra's protection. On several occasions, Ma is given opportunities to express her affection for the girl and to provide support on her journey to the North. Ma's actions demonstrate her ability to provide stability and a sense of belonging for Lyra, without appearing to be "naturally" inclined and devoted to motherhood in the same way as Molly.

Molly and Ma may be contrasted to the figures of unloving, indifferent, or exploitative mothers. Among them, in *Harry Potter*, we find Merope Gaunt Riddle, Lord Voldemort's mother. The woman is a victim of domestic violence perpetrated Merope, who has never received genuine affection, "wins" young Tom Riddle with a love potion, and from this emotionless relationship a son, Tom Riddle Jr. or Voldemort, is born. The father, upon discovering the deception, abandons the family, while the mother perishes as a result of her grief, eventually dying shortly after giving birth. If Molly and Lily make sacrifices for their children, Merope makes a sacrifice despite her

son. This substantial difference will later characterise the entire plot. The sacrifices of Molly and Lily generate positive characters, including an even salvific and messianic character in Harry's case, given the magnitude of the maternal sacrifice. In contrast, Merope's death gives rise to the story's main antagonist. Even Albus Dumbledore himself, while recounting Voldemort's story to Harry, underscores the gravity of Merope's actions and compares them to Lily's choices. He states, «Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage» (Rowling, 2007, p. 312). The negative character traits of Merope are further exemplified by her physical appearance, which is described as that of a woman who is not only incapable of love but also aesthetically unpleasant: «Her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person» (Ibidem).

Another figure depicted as lacking in love for her children is Eileen Prince, Severus Snape's mother. Eileen offers the reader a narrative of intrafamilial violence, wherein the girl exhibits a strong personality but is frequently verbally abused by her Muggle husband, who does not accept her magical powers. These abuses are observed by her son, in a realistic depiction of the phenomenon of intrafamilial witnessing violence (Dello Preite, 2022). The woman is described as a cold character, a distant and disinterested mother (Di Cesare, 2015). To reinforce this idea, the book again offers a strong aesthetic characterization: «The picture showed a skinny girl of around fifteen. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pale face. Underneath the photograph was the caption: Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team» (Rowling, 2003, p. 157).

Marisa Coulter, Lyra's mother in *His Dark Materials*, is also consistent with the definition of an indifferent or cruel mother. The protagonist is initially unaware of her biological connection to the woman: Lyra is the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, but she has been placed in the care of Jordan College, where her father sporadically visits the child, pretending to be an uncle. Both parents are thus cold and disinterested, although this trait is especially emphasized in the mother, who not only does not care for her daughter but places her at the center of dangerous power dynamics. Indeed, it is only when Mrs. Coulter requires Lyra's assistance that she decides to return to her and take her back as her assistant, never revealing her true identity.

A kind of mother-daughter bond seems to emerge indirectly, however, since Lyra, deprived of a family, feels "naturally" driven toward Mrs. Coulter, the first character that openly cares for her. «As she passed her on the way to the armchair, Mrs. Coulter touched Lyra's hair briefly, and Lyra felt a current of warmth flow into her, and blushed» (Pullman, 2003, p. 67). The initial relationship of trust and sharing, in which Mrs. Coulter will be the first to provide Lyra with a kind of "female education" passed from woman to woman (Ulivieri, 2007), is soon shattered when Lyra discovers the woman's true, cruel intentions. This leads the child to raise a barrier of silence and distrust (Trisciuzzi, 2010, p. 23).

Marisa Coulter is a character with a multifaceted and ambiguous nature. She challenges the traditionally passive portrayal of femininity since she is cunning, ingenious, ambitious, active and self-confident. The woman is ascribable to the narrative's antagonists, and it is precisely on her role as an enemy that her main characteristics are declined. In some cases, however, these characteristics exhibit moral ambiguity. She is skilled in manipulating others to achieve her goals, she is calculating and unscrupulous, and she is willing to sacrifice everything for personal advantage and to gain power (Thomson, 2004; Trisciuzzi, 2010). The character of Marisa Coulter shares numerous similarities with Bellatrix Lestrange, including her status as an unconventional woman and an antagonist. However, despite Mrs. Coulter's apparent lack of maternal instincts, she exhibits a maternal concern for Lyra that is starkly contrasted by Bellatrix's rejection of any form of motherhood.

Consequently, in the case of Marisa Coulter, we might assume that the character is evil and that her nature is revealed through her appearance. However, Lyra's mother is an exception to this rule, as she is described as «sweet», «kind», and «angelic» (Pullman, 2003), as well as beautiful and charming. It is precisely her charm and feigned kindness that serve as instruments of deception employed by the woman to mislead the children and gain their trust, thereby demonstrating a more complex nature than what initially appears.

4. Good maternal villains and cruel stepmothers

If we assume that positive characters are typically depicted as good mothers and negative ones as bad mothers, the situation becomes more complex when an antagonist is presented as a good mother. In the *Harry Potter* series, the character of Narcissa Black Malfoy, a follower of Lord Voldemort, exemplifies this dichotomy. Narcissa is depicted as arrogant, proud, and extremely self-confident, yet she is also a loving and caring mother figure. Like Lily, she is willing to defend her son Draco Malfoy at all costs, even to the point of deciding to betray Voldemort in order to protect him, which puts her own life at risk. Moreover, her choices illustrate how maternal love can shape and evolve different characters, influencing their actions and decisions. Draco's character differs from Voldemort's, de-

spite displaying negative traits. Throughout the saga, Draco demonstrates some of his own frailties and dilemmas, which are not as evident in Voldemort. The fact that Draco has experienced maternal love will enable him to choose his identity. This is not the case with Voldemort, who, having grown up without any kind of love, perceives evil as the only possible solution. Narcissa is thus an anti-canonical woman by literary standards (and not coincidentally is placed among the antagonists, not among the role models), but a rather traditional mother, especially considering parental roles. It is her husband, Lucius Malfoy, who is the actual head of the household.

In the *Harry Potter* series, another antagonist is constructed as a good mother: Petunia Evans Dursley, Harry's aunt. Petunia fulfils a dual role in the narrative: she is Dudley's biological mother but also Harry's adoptive mother. As a result, she represents a kind of fairy-tale stepmother (Ulivieri, 1999; Zipes, 1985). The character of Petunia is characterized by a number of contradictions. She exhibits a strikingly different attitude towards her natural or adopted son, Dudley, than she does towards Harry. While Dudley is spoiled, beloved, and constantly the center of the family's attention, Harry is regarded as a burden, a servant, and a modern-day Cinderella (Eccleshare, 2002). Petunia is a canonical mother to her biological son and is presented as a character who performs traditional gender roles. She is depicted as residing primarily in interior or domestic spaces, as a kind of angel of the hearth, and in *Harry Potter* adaptations, she is often portrayed wearing an apron, a symbol of traditional motherhood. Since the novel's focus is strongly tied to its protagonist, Harry, the prevailing perception of Petunia is that of a negative figure, akin to fairy tale stepmothers. Consequently, the aesthetic sphere is employed to reinforce and accentuate the woman's malevolence (Di Cesare, 2015). Petunia is portrayed as unattractive and disagreeable, with a particularly elongated neck that she uses to spy on her neighbours (Rowling, 1999, p. 7).

5. Conclusions

The female portraits under consideration exhibit a variety of characteristics and complexities. While some are firmly anchored in certain literary archetypes, others challenge the conventional narrative canon. In the case of *Harry Potter*, mothers remain particularly tied to the conventional portrayal of both female and maternal roles. The interpretation of maternal and gender roles varies considerably, yet the cultural and narrative norms of motherhood are rarely thoroughly revised. Indeed, canonical women are constructed as good mothers, while women who challenge gender constructs (aesthetic or behavioural) are depicted as bad mothers or non-mothers and play a negative role within the plot, such as that of the antagonist. The last two characters mentioned, Narcissa Malfoy and Petunia, represent exceptions to this tendency. Narcissa Malfoy is an antagonist but a loving mother; while Petunia's dual characterization could place the character in different categories of analysis. Furthermore, it is evident that in the *Harry Potter* series, the feminine is still strongly associated with an aesthetic sphere that encourages the reader to make immediate moral judgments. This is exemplified by the association of beauty with goodness and ugliness with badness, which is applied to a judgment about the maternal role. A more complex case is presented by *His Dark Materials*, which, while featuring fewer maternal figures, characterizes them through less traditional elements. The "good" mother, Ma Costa, is a woman outside the box, but she is not portrayed as an antagonist or as a model to be rejected. In contrast, the main villain of the narrative, Marisa Coulter, performs both femininity and motherhood in an unconventional manner, but she is not aesthetically labelled according to the traditional binomial that juxtaposes the aesthetic and moral spheres. Mrs. Coulter's character is similarly challenging to categorize, exhibiting behaviours that are at times ambiguous but consistently aligned with her role as an antagonist. Consequently, the final portrait of her is more nuanced than the simplistic dichotomy of "good" versus "bad" that is often portrayed in works like *Harry Potter,* where the mothers are often presented as either virtuous or malevolent.

In conclusion, maternal figures, although often secondary, exert a profound influence on the construction of the narrative and the growth of their fictional children, whose identity is often shaped by the parental role model. The two case studies considered demonstrate the potential of fantastic fiction to construct new models of narrative, gender, and parental roles, as demonstrated by *His Dark Materials*. However, in other cases this fiction presents a narrative that is strongly associated with tradition, with maternal behavior being morally evaluated and linked to aesthetic and narrative aspects of the characters, as in the case of *Harry Potter.*

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