

Treasure to Trash, Trash to Treasure: Dolls and Waste in Italian Children's Literature

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A growing preoccupation with waste, trash, and obsolescence may be observed in Western societies beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first. This phenomenon is largely due to the rapid and intense development of industrialization and consumer culture—the very movement that eventually prompted the birth, in late nineteenth-century Italy, of the industrial production of dolls.¹ A reflection of this historical and societal correlation between dolls and trash, confirmed by connections that are also psychological and philosophical, may be read in several literary texts for children written by Italian women between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries. In each of these narratives, the young protagonists own dolls that, though often on the verge of being dumped into the trash bin, play a crucial role in the formation of the protagonist's identity—a process represented as shaped by both psychological and material forces. The connection made by women between dolls and trash in Italian children's literature may be read as a culturally specific instance of the wider-ranging reflection on the role of trash in the formation of value, and even of the self.²

Certainly, psychological models of child development have much to teach us about the role dolls play in the formation of young people's identity.³ While keeping these models in mind, my reading of dolls in Italian children's literature, however, relies more overtly on philosophical and social reflections on trash, such as those by Italo Calvino, Gay Hawkins, Greg Kennedy, and John Scanlan. I propose this productive encounter between literary dolls and trash theory because, although it is true that the doll is “a *liminal object*, placed by the imagination at the border between the soul and the body” (Petrucci and

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Simeoni 6; original emphasis), there are also other border spaces that dolls occupy. These certainly include that between the maternal and the filial (a crucial one in all the doll tales I discuss below), but also another border area that in the scholarship on dolls has received little or no critical attention thus far: that between gold and feces and, more generally and usefully, between treasure and trash. That an important characteristic of some of the Italian literary dolls I analyze should be their feces and that, at the same time, these dolls should all be equated with trash at one point or another in their stories, is no coincidence. “Excrement provides our first experience of waste, on which all related experiences are ordered,” Kennedy has noted, and just as “wastage through devaluation results from a failure somehow to live up to our uniquely human capacities”—some of the characters’ inability to love leads them to treat the dolls as humanity’s other, as trash—so also, and conversely, excrement “seems like a waste that directly expresses our humanity” (8). When the dolls’ excrement is gold, it is as precious as the dolls themselves inevitably turn out to be—no matter how negative the first impressions they may make because of their unpretentious, dangerous, or fragile appearance. Even more precious is the identity-making bond of affection that these literary dolls elicit in those who care for them. The debasement of treasures into trash, namely the placement of dolls in the garbage—whether because the doll has lost its initial monetary value, or never had any to begin with—is the result of a violence that, even as it debases its object, diminishes the humanity of the one operating the transformation. Conversely, the transfiguration of trash into treasure—of feces into gold, of inanimate into animate, of ugliness into beauty—is the material representation of the reward for the selfless care that dolls demand for their owners’ acquisition of a mature and loving self.

Giovan Francesco Straparola’s “La poavola” (1550–56)

The child’s path toward identity formation through the doll’s liminal role may be read in a variety of texts. If the beloved doll of the eponymous Russian heroine of the folktale “Vasilissa the Beautiful”—her mother’s last gift before dying—protected the girl from both her abusive stepmother and the cannibalistic witch Baba Yaga, literary dolls are the objects of more complicated transactions. Their repeated association with waste and trash points to the complexity of the doll as a cultural object and to its crucial role in literary representations of the self. The bulk of this essay is dedicated to the presence of dolls in the literature for children produced by Italian women writers from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries; not coincidentally, the earliest and most famous Italian doll factory, Furga, was founded in 1872 (Bonato 20). It is nevertheless helpful to begin with a Renaissance doll created by a male author who addressed his work to a wider audience beyond children. Giovan Francesco Straparola’s (c. 1480–c. 1557) sixteenth-century “La poavola” (The doll) already contains some of the most important themes that later writers

were also to employ in their representation of dolls: the doll's protective, maternal function and, at the same time, its daughterly role through the owner's identification with a parental figure; its golden feces and, by extension, its link with money and wealth as well as with bodily waste; and its placement in the trash as the result of one of the characters' frustrated greed.

Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Nights of Straparola*, 1550–56), the collection generally recognized as containing the earliest examples of fairy tales in Europe, includes the story of a magical doll, “La poavola”—a word that means “doll” in some Northern Italian dialects. Straparola's doll, however, being made of rags, is utterly unlike the dolls from the Italian Renaissance that have come down to us—wealthy dolls richly clothed and thus among the first vehicles of fashion (Battaglioli 156). We must remember, however, that “the toys that survive may, in fact, be the ones played with the least, which suggests that we know even less about the history of actual toys than this small literature would indicate” (Beresin 796). Straparola's plain doll defecates “large quantities of money” and “much gold and silver” (347, 349), thus saving the impoverished protagonist, Adamantina.⁴ Like other magical dolls, such as Vassilissa's, the “poavola” appears at the owner's mother's death and takes over the latter's protective role, even as the doll's owner herself has the opportunity to learn and enact maternal practices of caring for others—every night, Adamantina lovingly massages her doll with oil, and the doll calls her “mamma.” In accordance with the duality intrinsic to the representation of dolls, the “poavola” is for Adamantina both a mother providing for her daughter's needs and, at the same time, a daughter who gives the girl an opportunity to learn how to love: love transforms everything, including feces, into something precious. Literally, in this tale, love turns trash into treasure.

The doll rewards Adamantina's care by excreting money. This identification of feces with money, focused on analogous physical and psychological processes of expulsion and retention, is one that Sigmund Freud famously elaborated upon: infants regard the feces they expel as a treasure that inevitably attracts and retains the parents' attention. Excrement, then, is both the most precious of objects (for children, it is a gift to their loved ones) and the least valuable (for adults, it is garbage). In Freud's words, “the contrast between the most precious substance known to man and the most worthless, which he rejects as ‘something thrown out,’ has contributed to this identification of gold with feces” (“Character and Anal Erotism” 32). Regardless of the actual value of excrement, the process of its exchange is emotionally and socially significant. As Scanlan explains in *On Garbage*, his wide-ranging examination of the detritus of Western culture, “money, as Freud noted, is actually like shit (i.e., human garbage): not only because it is alienated from the person (like excrement from the body), but also because the separation allows its further development into something that persists on its own” (15).

The expulsion of and separation from excrement, psychoanalysis claims, contributes to the formation of identity; the self needs separation from the

other in order to persist on its own. In the words of Julia Kristeva, “fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body,” a body that is in this process “in a state of permanent loss, in order to become *autonomous, distinct* from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it” (108; original emphasis). This process of identity formation through separation (of excrement from one’s body, of the other from one’s self) is highlighted in Straparola’s “La poavola” not only by the doll’s golden feces but also by the theft of the doll at the hands of greedy and envious neighbors. For them, however, the “poavola” defecates not money, but only common, disgusting feces, so that they angrily throw the cause of their frustration out the window and onto a heap of trash (352); the practice of “using the borders of the house for disposal” was common until the nineteenth century (Strasser 7). The doll’s duality emerges clearly at this point: it is either infinitely precious—when money is excreted—or utterly useless, something to be thrown in the trash.

The garbage heap containing the doll gets moved from this neighborhood dump to a larger, shared heap, out of which the king’s servant picks up the doll because the monarch needs something to wipe his bottom with after defecating. (Should the doll’s peculiar excretions, alternating between money and feces, not make the connection between these two objects sufficiently evident, there is this other pooper in the story: the king himself, the wealthiest possible character in any fairy tale.⁵) The doll, however, bites the king’s backside, so that the two producers of special feces—king and doll, the most and the least valuable characters—remain attached by teeth and buttocks throughout the last section of the story. Only their physical separation will provide narrative resolution and a final acquisition of identity for the protagonist. When Adamantina’s sweet words convince the “poavola” to release the painful oral-anal hold, the king makes the poor girl his queen, and the doll, with this crucial task accomplished, disappears forever.⁶

Contessa Lara’s *Il romanzo della bambola* (1896)

An almost identical narrative to Straparola’s “La poavola,” a folktale titled “La pupidda” (“The Little Doll”), was collected in Sicily and published in 1875 by famed ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè. The biggest difference in this story is that the doll, instead of biting the king’s buttocks, gets stuck inside his anus. The fact that “La pupidda” is from Sicily—on the opposite side of Italy from Straparola’s Venice—and was published in the late nineteenth century, five hundred years after Straparola’s book, is evidence not only that the doll’s story became widespread in both space and time, but also that the boundaries between literary fairy tales and folktales are indeed permeable. Nevertheless, whereas Straparola’s “poavola” and Pitrè’s “pupidda” are simple, and indeed seemingly worthless, rag dolls, *Il romanzo della bambola* (The doll’s novel), by Contessa Lara (pseudonym of Evelina Cattermole Mancini, 1849–1896), is the story of a historically specific, expensive fashion doll, one of those elaborate nineteenth-century toys “much

desired by (rich) little girls, to whom they were entrusted as icons of femininity, models of etiquette, and exercises in needlework, not as playthings in the ‘rag doll’ mode” (Robertson 22).⁷ In this novel, written by a controversial author known as much for her scandalous love life (which ended in her murder at the hands of her last lover) as for her literary production, Marietta’s expensive doll Giulia is an example of *bébé* dolls. Modeled to imitate primarily girls between two and twelve years old, their production—which in Italy began in Milan in 1890 (Bonato 20)—led to the late nineteenth-century doll craze about which there were worries that extravagance and luxury might corrupt little girls (Peers 70; Robertson 24). The notion of Marietta’s corruption is very much at the center of Contessa Lara’s novel; this corruption, however, is not caused by the doll, who instead is its victim. Marietta’s self-absorption, brought about by her moneyed upbringing, is the cause of Giulia’s transformation from expensive treasure into monetarily worthless trash.⁸

Giulia’s story is one of repeated transformations. This doll’s first owner, the spoiled and heartless seven-year-old Marietta, sees the toy as a commodity rather than a subject and object of love; her first question upon receiving the doll is, “Daddy, how much does this doll cost?” (11). As for Marietta’s father, Giulia had indeed deduced that “one could tell he adored his daughter since he did not mind spending so much money for her” (9). But commodities, however precious, are liable to lose their value and become garbage: “It may even be that we can think of commodities as deferred trash” (Stallybrass 407). Marietta carelessly pulls out Giulia’s hair when she finds it difficult to comb, she hurls the doll to the floor out of anger at having to share her toy, and wrecks Giulia while dragging the poor thing among thorns. As Scanlan points out—and Giulia’s literary personification encourages this interpretation—“the worse thing one person can do to another is to reduce them to the nothingness of garbage” (18). Rather than learn to love through example and opportunity, as Adamantina did with her “poavola,” Marietta can be neither mother nor daughter to her doll.⁹ Within a short time she loses all interest in Giulia, and a servant puts the doll away in a closet “among Marietta’s old clothes: castoffs destined to be given away to charity” (37).

As a “castoff,” Giulia plays a role in Marietta’s growth and identity. Calvino reflects on this process in “La poubelle agréée,” his essay on the philosophical implications of taking out the trash: “Only by throwing something away can I be sure that something of myself has not yet been thrown away and perhaps need not be thrown away now or in the future” (103). Giulia’s status as trash is confirmed when a mouse arrives and gnaws on the doll’s shoe, stocking, and, eventually, foot. At this point, the crippled Giulia is given away to a poor relative; for Marietta, now, Giulia “was a broken toy and nothing else” (44). Marietta and her family treated Giulia as a commodity which, before use, was marketable and desirable but, once consumed, has become financially worthless but socially indispensable garbage. The ability to throw Giulia away confirms the family’s status as wealthy, since “garbage is reflective of social prestige; wealth

and status are correlated with the capacity of a person (or a society) to discard commodities, i.e. to generate garbage" (Shohat and Stam 54).

Giulia's next owner, Marietta's sickly and impoverished relative Camilla, knows how to love the doll. But in Camilla's house, too, Giulia's identification with trash is always imminent: the young girl's jealous, materialistic mother threatens in anger that, "One of these days I will throw your doll out the window, and this is how the story will end!" (54). Camilla's body, after she dies, is likened to Giulia's: "Now the little girl was perfectly similar to the doll: quiet, immobile, silent, her lips slightly parted in a kind of smile, her arms inert, lying along her sides, an unnatural rigidity throughout her body" (72). Doll and corpse are waste objects, the castoff remains of what they once were. In this novel, the corpse takes the place of feces as the icon of bodily waste most likened to the doll, as that which the self must expel in order to preserve its identity—for "death," as Scanlan notes, "constitutes the human return to matter, and is in a sense, the 'garbaging' of the body" (9).

At Camilla's death, Giulia does not end up out the window like Straparola's "poavola," but does become, indisputably, trash. The doll that originally had been purchased for five hundred liras is now handed over to a rag picker in return for only one: "Now that doll is not worth more than that," the old man says to Camilla's mother. His argument ends with a misogynous twist that reinforces the association between the doll and human waste: "it is the same for an old woman: she may have been beautiful, but she is old" (77). The rag picker and his family complete Giulia's transformation into trash; a little girl pulls out much of what is left of Giulia's hair and, over the rest, she spreads rancid oil in the attempt to untangle it: "To Giulia it seemed like she was no longer herself" (80). The girl's brother cuts up the doll's face with a knife, until Giulia becomes "a monster," "a ruined toy" (88); the old man himself puts Giulia among "stuff to be cleaned away; stuff that was so dusty and moldy that anyone looking at it was bound to cross himself" (89).

Finally, the doll, all monetary value expended, comes to belong to a good-hearted peasant girl, who loves Giulia for who, and not for what, this doll is. What had become trash through one girl's carelessness reacquires, thanks to another girl's loving care, the value of the treasure it once was; it was not uncommon for impoverished children to inherit the beat-up and cast-off toys of their wealthier peers (Becchi 150; of course, this remains true today). Italian doll literature repeatedly reminds us "that rubbish is socially defined" (Thompson 11); that waste "isn't a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classifications and relations" (Hawkins 2); and that "What is rubbish to some is useful or valuable to others, and the ones who perceive value are nearly always the ones with less money" (Strasser 9).

Elsa Morante's *Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina* (1942/1959)

Like Contessa Lara, Elsa Morante (1912–1985)—among the most illustrious women writers of twentieth-century Italy—is best known for her work addressed to adults, not children. But she, too, wrote a children's book featuring a doll: *Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina* (Caterina's extraordinary adventures), first published in 1942 and again, revised and illustrated by the author, in 1959. The book engages the wartime background of its first edition through its eponymous protagonist, impoverished to the point of hunger, and her simple fabric doll—antiphrastically named “Bellissima” (“Very beautiful”). In its ruined state, Bellissima only distantly and mostly by contrast evokes the Italian Lenci fabric dolls so popular during this time period. Mistaken for a piece of trash (like Straparola's “poavola”) and carted off, early in the story, by a greedy rag picker (like Contessa Lara's Giulia), Bellissima is the object of Caterina's book-long quest. Morante's story is thus that of a double loss; the doll stands for the (unexplainedly) absent mother, but it is also absent throughout most of the tale, having been placed in the trash by Caterina herself. Every doll's essentially liminal status, every doll's precarious perching between two worlds—animate and inanimate, mother and daughter, treasure and trash—is in this text dramatized by Bellissima's presence/absence in the text itself. And yet it is to this trashing that the doll owes literary significance, exemplifying the fact that “The discarded and the outmoded have a longstanding function as a means of rehearsing the fundamental questions that frame human life . . . encompassing themes of knowledge, *vanitas* and redemption” (Pye 4).

Caterina knows that her doll, unlike herself, does not suffer the privations of war. She explains that “Bellissima is the happiest one because, being made entirely of fabric, she feels neither hunger nor cold, unlike Rosetta and Caterinuccia” (10–11). She also knows that the doll's simplicity proclaims the owner's poverty (though Caterina will soon regret such a display of aesthetic and social vanity). “You are stupid and even ugly,” Caterina repeatedly complains,

“with just four hairs and eyes made of red thread! I would like a beautiful, real doll. You are like a rag. . . . You are just made of fabric and think you are beautiful. Is it true that you think you are beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will throw you in the trash, head down. Are you happy in the trash?”

“Yes.”

“And you will stay there, then. You are useless, anyway, and good for nothing. If at least you were worth one penny, I would sell you and buy a morsel of bread.” (14–15)

Prey to social and financial illusions, Caterina does place her doll in the trash—an act that is aggressive and brutal. Trash, as Kennedy reminds us, “connotes violence. We sometimes apply the word to people as a particularly venomous pejorative. . . . It is a mode of comportment, treating things without care, negatively, and destructively” (xvi). The trashing of a doll—and this was clearly what

Marietta progressively did with Giulia—enacts the opposite of what doll play is supposed to teach: care is supplanted by carelessness, nurture by destruction. At the same time, this act of casting off—permanent for Marietta, temporary for Caterina—aids in the development of the doll owner's identity, for better or for worse, because of the separation it enacts: "the creation of garbage is the result of a separation—of the desirable from the unwanted; the valuable from the worthless . . . And it is because differentiation is a fundamental human activity that garbage is everywhere" (Scanlan 15). In the same way as Marietta—although, unlike Marietta, Caterina regrets her action right away, and is redeemed by her regret—what the girl wants to separate from is the ruined toy as a sign of its owner's incompleteness: as not perfectly wealthy in Marietta's case, and as abjectly poor in Caterina's.

When the rag picker comes looking for rags to buy, Caterina claims she does not have any; she has already realized her doll's value, and her redemption has thus begun. Generous Bellissima, however, makes a self-offering to the rag picker so that Caterina may have money for food: "And the poor Bellissima, again without being pushed, suddenly extended her arms as if to say to the little man: 'I am a rag, yes, yes I am. Put me in your sack and leave Caterina a coin for her dinner'" (19). But Bellissima's sacrifice turns out to be for naught; the rag picker's coin is pierced and worthless—just like Bellissima—and Caterina is desperate because she has lost a doll that she now (mis)remembers as being good and smart: "And she was so good, Tit, she was! She could understand what you said to her better than any other doll. And she could say 'yes' and 'no' just by pushing her a little, just a tiny bit" (22). Having transformed, and having been herself transformed, through the example and practices of loving care—through the knowledge, in other words, of the value of trash—Caterina is identified more than once as "Bellissima's mother," and the doll—whose true value, beyond financial *vanitas*, is finally known—is no longer described as being made of rags, but rather as "made of fabric" (34, 40). It is indeed thanks to those previously despised, tell-tale hair and eyes, made of coarsely stitched thread, that the doll introduced as "Grigia" is recognized as being, in fact, Bellissima (78). Whereas Giulia's precious and expensive fabrics become worthless rags in the course of Contessa Lara's tale, contributing to the doll's loss of identity and of self-recognition (at least in the eyes of the wealthy), Bellissima's rags and coarse stitches become fabric and embroidery, allowing—thanks to the loss of the illusions of vanity—the doll to be known and its owner to be redeemed. Marietta's violent superficiality, developed and hardened by a spoiled childhood, was irredeemably permanent; Caterina's, conversely, was fleeting and born of hunger and frustration. Unlike Marietta, Caterina can and does change.

Bianca Pitzorno's *La bambola dell'alchimista* (1988) and *La bambola viva* (1994)

Whereas Contessa Lara and Elsa Morante wrote mostly for an adult audience—the children's stories of Giulia and Bellissima being notable exceptions to their customary genres—in the late twentieth century dolls became prominent in the work of some of Italy's best-known writers for children. The prolific and beloved Bianca Pitzorno (1942–), for example, wrote two books entirely focused on dolls and intertextually related to one another: *La bambola dell'alchimista* (The alchemist's doll) and *La bambola viva* (The living doll). Unlike their predecessors, both of these literary dolls are not representations of school-age girls, but baby dolls resembling the immensely popular, Italian-made Ciciobello, first produced in 1962.

The doll in Pitzorno's 1988 book was made in Heidelberg in 1726—the heyday of mechanical dolls—by an alchemist aided by a doll maker. Named Petra Filosofale (literally, “philosopher's stone”), this doll is worth a fortune as an antique but brings bad luck to anyone who buys it. The younger of the two antiques dealers who currently own it “has decided to throw the doll in the trash” (18) out of angry frustration. By acting the way dolls should not act, Petra has disrupted the boundary between life and lifelessness; dolls should not have physical effects on their owners. By trashing the doll, the young man is reestablishing his identity as an antiques dealer—rather than, say, a purveyor of magical objects. In Calvino's words, “the gesture of throwing away is the first and indispensable condition of being, since one is what one does not throw away” (104)—in this case, magic and bad luck. Hawkins goes even further with this argument: “What we want to get rid of tells us who we are. This is true. But what we want to get rid of also *makes* us who we are” (2; original emphasis)—not only in psychological terms, he contends, but also “in the habits and embodied practices through which we decide what is connected to us and what isn't” (4). The older, wiser dealer, more certain of his own professional identity and less fearful of what might disturb it, does not turn to the garbage heap. Instead—trusting perhaps in the power of a child's innocence—he gives Petra to Teo, a boy who has been admiring the doll and who desperately wants a baby sibling, which his mother refuses to produce. Teo discovers that Petra comes alive at the push of a button and, possibly inspired by Straparola's “poavola,” defecates pieces of gold.¹⁰

In tales about mechanical dolls, the uncertainty between being animate and inanimate, alive or lifeless, founds the narrative and produces that sense of the uncanny—at once familiar and strange, attractive and repulsive—analyzed by Freud in his 1919 essay by the same name. Freud's work is focused on E. T. A. Hoffmann's “Sand Man,” a story featuring a mechanical doll tragically mistaken by the male protagonist for a woman. (Hoffmann's doll, however, imitates a nubile young woman and not a helpless baby; the sexual desirability that makes this soulless automaton so dangerous to the protagonist's sanity

is absent from any of the texts under consideration here.¹¹) It is this uncanny uncertainty, embodied in its own way by Petra, which compels the young antiques dealer to throw the precious doll in the trash. Through the recurrence of names, relationships, and situations, Pitzorno's tale self-consciously recalls Hoffmann's. Pitzorno, however, eliminates the uncanny, frightening effect of live dolls by giving Petra two switches, one behind each ear. Thanks to these, Teo controls when the doll comes to life, and his identity as powerful parental figure or older sibling, unlike the antiques dealer's, is never in question. As in previous doll tales, here, too, the bodily care given the doll—namely, the satisfaction of Petra's physical demands, such as for feeding and attention—is rewarded with good things, exemplified by the doll's golden feces as symbol of affection. (When Petra is temporarily stolen, all that the thieves are able to find in the doll's diaper is regular baby poop—like Straparola's thieving neighbors.) The fact that being both alive and loved is marked by golden defecation mixes elements of Straparola's tale with Hoffmann's and introduces a touch of comic relief utterly absent from the uncanny, frightening “Sand Man.” The young antiques dealer, afraid of boundary crossing and unwilling to provide loving care to a seemingly lifeless toy, mistakes treasure for trash and, through this single act, emerges in the book as a narrow-minded and loveless boor unable to know the true value of things.

Petra's magic is kept secret from adults largely thanks to this doll's physical resemblance to Teo's best friend's baby sister, whose pram the boy occasionally borrows. Such similarity between live baby and inert doll, and the confusing use of a real baby's pram, is the narrative motor of Pitzorno's *La bambola viva*. Here the protagonists are spirited twin girls who receive from an aunt—concerned that they are not allowed to play with their baby brother—“a beautiful baby doll that resembled in every way a seven-or-eight-month-old little boy” (13). Like Marietta did with Giulia, the twins end up trashing Mirco—not through lovelessness, however, but because of their energetic enthusiasm and the desire to give their doll a livelier existence than their dull baby brother's. After reading in school the book *La bambola dell'alchimista*, the sisters begin to wish for their plaything to come alive—though they don't “care much about the golden poop, since they would not have known what to do with it” (24). When Mirco's pram is accidentally exchanged with one holding a live baby girl, Roberta, the sisters rush to check their “living doll's” poop: “‘Come on, let's undress him and see if by any chance he has made a golden poop,’ Chiara said. But Roberta's poop was perfectly normal” (42).

Whereas Giulia's and Bellissima's owners, and therefore their readers, had no trouble pretending their dolls were alive—thus realizing a common children's desire—for Pitzorno's protagonists the doll must come to life literally and not just imaginatively, through magic in Petra's case and mistaken identity in Mirco/Roberta's. Petra is seamlessly changed from inert to animate at the push of a button; Roberta is, unbeknownst to the twin sisters, a very real little girl. Far from generating that sense of the uncanny that accompanied the encounter

with mechanical dolls for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century adults, Pitzorno's young protagonists are elated by the discovery of their doll's living nature; they either have a baby sibling they are not allowed to play with, or desire one their mother refuses to produce. As Peers puts it—and we can apply this to the boy Teo as well—“The doll has many feminist resonances. Not only does she provide harsh, reductive lessons for oppressed females, she is also a site for female creativity and entrepreneurship” (9). Pitzorno's characters, in their dealings with dolls or with doll-like babies, are creative and entrepreneurial indeed; the tenacity of their desire, prompted by their encounter with fortuitous helpers and their willingness to risk much for love, makes their dolls come alive. In both cases, it is excrement that confirms life (Roberta's) and love (Petra's); it is the seemingly valueless—feces as the ultimate example of garbage—that declares the true value of things.

Donatella Ziliotto's *La bambola, La pazza* (1993)

There are no feces but plenty of garbage in Donatella Ziliotto's book *La bambola, La pazza* (The doll, the crazy one). The eponymous doll, ugly and made of rags like Morante's Bellissima, is given as a gift by an elderly doll seller (whose other dolls are all elegant and expensive) to a little girl at an existential crossroads: Should Eva-Sofia love an impoverished but lively and generous little boy, Teo, or should she choose the wealthy but dull and self-centered Filippo? The protagonist's double name reflects her contradictions; prey to temptation like Eve yet in the end wise like her second name suggests, she is squeamish in public but, when alone, indulges in dirt and trash: “she used to clean her fingers, dirty with honey, on her skirt, spit on plants, blow her nose with a dinner napkin, stick cherry pits up her nose” (10). As that which, in Scanlan's words, “continually resists any of our attempts to disconnect from it,” trash, for Eva-Sofia, has the disturbing effects of liminal things: “Uncanny garbage then becomes capable of inducing horror because of the presumed harmful effects it has on the bodies of personal and social order, indicating their fragile and transient nature” (Scanlan 36). In this story, doll and garbage both provoke at first in Eva-Sofia a sinister dread she eventually overcomes through a pursuit of knowledge about the present and the past, the rejection of the illusions inherent in commodities, and self-sacrificing acts of redemption.

The live, mischievous doll is apparently worthless, “one of those dolls that poor mothers make out of rags” (13). Like Morante's Caterina, Eva-Sofia also must learn the true value of the apparently valueless. Whereas the knowing doll seller holds the doll “delicately, as if she were quite precious,” Eva-Sofia must “hide her disgust” as she holds it “with two fingers” (13–14). Filippo, upon hearing of the doll's restlessness, advises Eva-Sofia to “Throw that doll away!” (17). But when, because Eva-Sofia is afraid to do it herself,¹² Filippo does throw the doll in a trash can, he is swiftly punished by the very trash the doll is associated with: “He took her by one arm, went straight to the nearest

trash can, and threw her in. When he tried to cover it, though, the lid was stuck. And a moment later, no one ever knew how, Filippo was covered with trash" (18). Filippo is punished for refusing, in Kennedy's words, "to take physical care of things," his own humanity questioned because "as humans we exist in our essential humanity only when we thoughtfully comply [in taking care of things]. Trash necessarily follows from the logic of care-free commodities, whose consumption necessarily excludes taking care of them" (123).

Conversely, the next day Teo describes enthusiastically to Eva-Sofia "how many treasures may be found in a trash dump," while she looks at him "disgusted" (19). Whereas Eva-Sofia spends so much time cleaning herself that "she felt immaculate, a little holy herself" (22), Teo is constantly dirty, like his deceased chimney-sweep father. The doll is like Teo and unlike Filippo. Eva-Sofia is located between the two, because of her dual relationship with trash—public disdain and private pleasure. The doll is indeed so covered with soot as to be called by Eva-Sofia "a monster" (22).

Puzzled by the doll's identity—is it a treasure, as the doll seller claims and the resemblance with lovable Teo suggests, or does it indeed belong in the trash, as Filippo believes?—Eva-Sofia asks the doll seller: "What is this doll?" (26). The old lady explains that the doll was her chimney-sweep boyfriend's wedding gift to her when she chose to marry the dull yet rich mayor. Through the years, the doll became more and more filthy in memory of the fun, messy times the doll seller and chimney sweep used to have together—an allegory of "the significance of the obsolete, outmoded and discarded as carriers of memory" (Pye 1), an example of how "the discarded thing appears to make the past, or at least the potential past, visible in the present" (5). Teo's own familiarity with dirt and trash, inherited from his father (the doll seller's former boyfriend, the reader assumes), is a sign of his communion with nature and with others. Unafraid of getting dirty, he rescues a bird from a chimney and then the crazy doll from the river, where Filippo had tried to drown it for having thrown his precious teacups in the water: that is, the doll had exposed Filippo's commodities as the trash all commodities eventually become and as illusions, *vanitas*, incapable of bringing happiness. Eva-Sofia can now recognize Filippo, and not the doll, as the true monster of the story: "Never, never, not even for a thousand teacups, not even for two thousand silver sugar bowls, for three thousand yards of brocade would I want to be friends with a monster like Filippo!" (39–40). With Calvino, we might see in Filippo "the unhappy retentive (or the miser) who, fearing to lose something of his own, is unable to separate himself from anything, hoards his feces and ends up identifying with his own detritus and losing himself in it" (103). Conversely, Eva-Sofia learns who she is by separating from what she is not (the commodities she initially desired) thanks to, ironically, a doll that refuses separation and hovers between treasure and trash, life and lifelessness. Toward the end of the story, the crazy doll is seemingly dead and thus a castoff, a corpse: "They went back to the town looking like two shipwrecks holding a small corpse" (40)—thus showing, once again, that "representations of the

defunct and discarded may be employed as a means of critiquing or exploring the construction of value systems" (Pye 3). Although—or because—totally trashed, the doll has achieved the doll seller's pedagogical intent. In the end, the crazy doll turns out to be as annoyingly alive as ever; in the middle of the night, Eva-Sofia is awakened by its loud snoring.

Both in social history and in literary texts, dolls often appear within a context of female initiation, hereditary transmission, and identity formation (Milillo 64). Thus also the stories discussed in these pages feature dolls that are given to young people by parental, mentoring figures: an aged female vendor in Straparola; Marietta's loving though misguided father in Contessa Lara; Caterina's powerless older sister in Morante; the elderly antiques dealer and the twins' concerned aunt in Pitzorno's two stories; and the wise, regretful doll seller in Ziliotto. (Pitzorno's stories modulate the gendered tradition by including a male receiver in *La bambola dell'alchimista*, and a male doll in *La bambola viva*.) Each gift marks the child's initiation into adulthood, because these dolls prompt their young owners to take up behaviors that, readers are either told or led to believe, will permanently affect the course of their lives. Appearing at pivotal moments in the characters' existential paths, these dolls are not simply icons of childhood innocence and maternal protectiveness. Nor should dolls more generally continue to be misunderstood, these texts suggest, "as trivial artifacts of a commercialized girls' culture; as representations of femininity and maternity; as generators of only maternal feelings and domestic concerns and, as such, obstacles to the development of girls as individuals; as creations of socially conservative dollmakers" (Formanek-Brunell 1).

Instead, as lifeless simulacra of humanity, dolls preserve the traces of a time when they played a more active role in Italian society at large: historically, as votive offerings to female deities and as funeral companions to girls and women in Roman antiquity, for example; anthropologically, in traditional Italian peasant society, as a means of strengthening female identity and thus reducing the tension associated with fertility and childbirth¹³; and in Italian children's literature of the past hundred years and more, as complex representations of some of the ways in which we become who we are. One of the ways in which this process of identity formation unfolds is by recognizing the otherness that is not the self—trash as it is exemplified in broken or ruined dolls—even as one must acknowledge that not all that glitters is gold: for sometimes, these stories teach us, excrement itself glitters blindingly. Conversely, glittering treasures may be found in what appears at first as unwanted rubbish—whether formerly beautiful and now ruined dolls, or dolls that, ineptly made with scraps of fabric, never had any monetary value and always did belong in the trash heap. Through the practice of learning and appreciating the true value of such apparently worthless things, through the act of regretting an initial desire for the removal of these boundary-defying objects, the difference these dolls embody and the instability they encourage may begin to be accepted as the path to leaving one's own immaturity behind and growing into an adult, loving, competent human being.

Notes

1. For political as well as economic and cultural reasons, this happened later in Italy than in other European countries such as France and Germany (see Bonato 20).
2. Another example of this reflection is the novel presence of discarded things in twentieth-century visual arts. Think of Marcel Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*, made out of an old urinal, or Piero Manzoni's 1961 *Artist's Shit*—his own feces, jarred and labeled.
3. See Dancy; Hall and Ellis; and Basten.
4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
5. Dundes points to the evidence of this connection in folklore, through proverbs—"Money is like manure: it is only good when it is spread around"—and expressions such as "to have money up the ass," and, for US military and civil service employees, the description of payday as "the day the eagle shits" (x).
6. Straparola's "poavola" morphs in the following century into a duck—Giambattista Basile's "La papara" (The duck), in his 1634–36 collection *Pentameron*. In turn some critics see this duck as the ancestor of the Grimm brothers' "Golden Goose" (Croce cix; Gasparini 33–34).
7. An early incarnation of *Il romanzo della bambola* is found in Contessa Lara's short story "La bambola vanitosa" (The vain doll, 1893). In this version, the abandoned doll commits suicide by jumping from a servant's hand, which results in its decapitation.
8. Contessa Lara's *Il romanzo della bambola* provides the most important Italian example of the "doll story genre" that developed in France beginning in the early 1800s (Brown 69–70).
9. In De Amicis's essay about a doll-repair shop, *Il "Re delle bambole"* (The "king of dolls," 1890), the eponymous doll-maker notes that those girls who are indifferent to dolls rarely become good mothers (13).
10. Pooping dolls, incidentally, have indeed been around since the 1970s; in 2008, the pooping Baby Alive was among the most popular and controversial Christmas gifts; see Schulte.
11. On the misogynous parallels between women and dolls, see Scafoglio 53–54.
12. As Cardini reminds us, "Idol or toy, beloved or tormented, the doll remains first of all a magical object. For this reason it inspires tenderness and, at the same time, fear" (29).
13. See Simeoni.

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