

The Short-Legged Fairy: Reading and Teaching *Pinocchio* as a Feminist

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Lying can be an adaptation to dominant ways of knowing or a means of challenging them; one can lie to avoid conflict or to present an alternative epistemology. These strategies are found at the personal, the pedagogical, and the political levels. In *Pinocchio* there are two kinds of lies, and it is the Fairy who explains the difference: “There are lies with short legs, and lies with long noses” (211). Her distinction has by now become proverbial in Italy, thanks to that most memorable image of Collodi’s tale: Pinocchio’s growing nose. But we may ask about the first type of lie, the short-legged one. The Fairy mentions it, even lists it first, but Pinocchio’s lies are manifested on his face, not in his limbs. Where are the short-legged lies in this book, whom do they characterize, and how do they contribute to a feminist reading of the novel?

One can lie verbally as well as with body language, so let us consider an enchanted, deceptive, and fairly short-legged animal—a blue-haired female goat whose bleating lies, located halfway between body and language, incarnate the Fairy’s pedagogy of mendacity: “While he was swimming along aimlessly, Pinocchio saw a rock that seemed made of white marble there in the middle of the sea, and on top of the rock a pretty little She-Goat who was bleating tenderly and beckoning him to come near” (415). Liberated by the Fairy’s fish from his asinine bodily envelope, Pinocchio flees by water and sees and hears, on a rock as white as the Fairy’s house, a magic animal in whom he recognizes, thanks to the incongruous color of her hair, his beloved Fairy, because “[t]he most curious thing of all was that the pretty Goat’s hair . . . was all blue—but such a radiant blue that it very much recalled the hair of the beautiful Little Girl.” She calls out to him, warning him of the dangerous Shark: “Hurry, Pinocchio, for mercy’s sake! the pretty little Goat bleated loudly” (417). She even holds out “her little hoofs to help him out of the sea” (419), but her short legs are useless: he is swallowed.

“The Fairy of land and sea, of birds and fish, knows too many things, governs too much for this scene to be read literally” (Manganelli 183). Indeed, from a literal perspective, the scene does not make sense, fraught as it is with contradictions. The Goat-Fairy calls Pinocchio to herself like a siren her sailors—does she not know a monster is near? Throughout the book she commands the animals—is she powerless to stop the Shark? Omniscient about Pinocchio’s affairs, she must know that Geppetto is in the monster’s belly—why does she try to pull Pinocchio away from his father? Ever an intermediary, unstable character, her role as mother brings her near Pinocchio in his time of danger, even as her pedagogical sternness refuses to diminish the pain of his learning; he must enter the belly of the Shark in order to find his father and, eventually, his human self; there is no

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easier way. Sent by the Fairy, the little fish had physically eaten away his donkey body; the encounter within the big fish, orchestrated by the same magic being, will divest him of his wooden body.

The reader cannot help but wonder what this Fairy is: helper or enchantress, metaphor or archetype, alter ego or mother figure. In a book famous for its mendacious long-nosed protagonist, there is also the question of whether her long skirts hide short legs—whether the Fairy’s lies, that is, are the short-legged kind to Pinocchio’s long-nosed ones.

Pinocchio tells the story of a male puppet made by a man and surrounded by boys and middle-aged and elderly men. The puppet will someday become one of these boys and eventually, it is assumed, grow into one of these men. Funland is a place emblematic of this masculine society: “Its population was made up entirely of boys” (367). Few female humans are found in Collodi’s book: Pinocchio encounters a “little old lady” by the beach (265; perhaps an incarnation of the Fairy), and among the circus audience, enjoying his donkey tricks, there are “girls and boys of all ages” (395). The Fairy first appears at the end of chapter 15: she is a dead little girl with blue hair. In the first version of the book (1881), this chapter was the last one, and the Fairy’s role was minor. A feminist reading of *Pinocchio* will inevitably focus on the blue-haired Fairy as the only female of relevance in the book. Additionally, a feminist reader may explore questions of identity in the ambiguous figure of Pinocchio as he relates to the Fairy: how we come to be who we are, socially and psychologically, and how this process is expressed in literary terms. Lastly, in studying a book like *Pinocchio*, which explicitly presents itself as being about teaching and learning, a discussion on the objectives and methods of feminist pedagogy can be rewardingly developed: how we read, learn, and teach; how Pinocchio and the Fairy, in particular, do these things; how they can be done in a feminist way; and what the place of lying and ambiguity might be in pedagogical and feminist practices.

Whether or not the half-truths the Fairy utters and the deceptions in which she is involved can be considered lies depends on what we make of her as a character. In the many decades since its publication, numerous scholars trained in a variety of disciplines have interpreted *Pinocchio* and thus created the field humorously referred to as “pinocchiology” (Stone, “Pinocchio” 329). Each of these perspectives can provide the basis for a feminist classroom discussion of Collodi’s masterpiece, thus introducing students to the polyphony of literary criticism in general and of its feminist possibilities in particular. A literary-historical examination of the genesis of the book, for example, makes us wonder what is earned by Collodi’s continuation of the book beyond the fifteenth chapter and how Pinocchio’s actions and decisions afterward differ between those of the first part, where there was no Fairy to guide (and perhaps misguide) him. In the second, longer part, she assumes an active narrative role. Structuralism asks to what extent the blue-haired Fairy fits in the tradition of fairy tales. Collodi’s fairy is sui generis, pushing Pinocchio away from herself and into the real world instead of

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enchancing him into her bed. She plays the role of sister and mother rather than the traditionally more fairylike role of lover; her behavior defies the genre and perhaps the gender limitations this genre imposes.

The complex themes of sexuality and reproduction are central to a feminist reading of Collodi's tale. A sociohistorical perspective can illuminate differences in Geppetto's and the Fairy's class and gender roles. In chapter 17, her comfortably furnished house contrasts with his bare one. Pinocchio too can live in such posh surroundings (and at the end of the novel, he does), if he heeds her advice in chapter 25: everyone has the duty to work lest they contract the "horrible disease" that is idleness (287). The Fairy is the embodiment of middle-class work ethic, in opposition to Geppetto's beggary; she is a stern educator as much as a generous giver. In the novel the two foster parents never meet—they literally live worlds apart. This narrative choice might say something about the Fairy's position as mother and as woman, that she is unnecessary, perhaps even deleterious, to the now-adult human being who has acquired his identity thanks to her mediation.

The Fairy's loss of position can be interpreted from both a social and a psychoanalytic perspective. Geppetto's paternity embodies a maternal dimension, but the Fairy also relishes the role of single parent, raising Pinocchio without a father. The differences between Pinocchio's two parent figures are not only socioeconomic and behavioral; more radically, they are sexual, and psychoanalytic tools can be helpful in understanding the complex family dynamic at work in the Geppetto-Fairy-Pinocchio triangle. While living with Geppetto, Pinocchio often must seek his own (scant) food, while with the Fairy his oral drives are all amply satisfied. In chapter 29, for instance, she plans a breakfast for Pinocchio and his friends consisting of "two hundred cups of *caffè-e-latte* and four hundred buns buttered on the inside and on the outside" (343). From a Freudian standpoint, Pinocchio is for the blue-haired Fairy "a child-phallus" whom she makes "the pampered center of a world structured around oral drives" (Apostolidès 78). In Jungian terms, she is an alimentary Goddess, the archetypal Great Mother, representing the unconscious forces of nature that he needs to reconcile with the Father as the structuring principle of social and psychological order (Grassi 91–92).

In addition to structuralist, sociohistorical, and psychoanalytic readings, the blue-haired Fairy plays an important role in religious interpretations of the tale: she has been seen as an incarnation of Isis, the mistress of animals and transformations (Zolla 166–167). According to a popular Christian interpretation, based on the acquisition by the puppet, in chapter 36, of humanity as his true nature, Pinocchio is Everyman and the Fairy—blue like the color of Mary's mantle but especially because, like Mary, she is different from all other creatures—is a multivalent figure of redemption and salvation. She is the Virgin Mary, coredeemer and, like the Fairy, sister and mother to her only son; she is Sophia and Providentia, God's wisdom and providence; she is Christ the redeemer; she is the

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Church, principle of renewal and vehicle of salvation (Biffi, “*Mistero*” 41–48, 74–76).

The sea scene, during which Pinocchio swims in vain toward the bleating blue Goat, can be read from each of these perspectives. Transformed into an animal, the Fairy plays the role of helper delineated by structuralism. As Pinocchio’s primary educator, his social mother, the Goat facilitates, through her failed rescue, his physical reunion with his father, the true head of any traditional family. As an object of desire toward which Pinocchio swims, the Goat brings both life and death: after fulfilling Pinocchio’s oral drives, she now lets him be the object of the Shark’s. Like Mary at the cross, the Goat is present at Pinocchio’s necessary suffering, and, like Christ and the Church, she ensures her protégé’s eventual salvation—though not before a symbolic, Jonah-like death.

Although a changing being, Pinocchio does not become a boy until the book’s end. He remains throughout his adventures an in-between creature, at once inanimate as the wood that makes him and animate as the boy he wants to be. He easily slips into the behavior or form of an animal: he does the work of a dog, is mistaken for a fish, and gets changed into a donkey. Equally hybrid is the Fairy, Pinocchio’s sister for a time, creature of forest and town, child and adult at once, alive and dead, human and inhuman both. She takes the appearance of an animal and orders animal servants around—the Snail, the Poodle, the Pigeon, to name just three. If Pinocchio’s transformations are a figure for adolescence and the attainment of individuality, then, *pace* theories of sexual difference, the self-dignity Pinocchio achieves is a figure of human growth and change, both male and female. But that growth comes at a cost and with a loss.

Pinocchio, like his readers, is puzzled by the puppet body he has cast off (“How funny I was when I was a puppet!” [461]). Equally puzzling is the Fairy’s disappearance at the end. He last sees her in the flesh as a goat; then he sends her money while she is sick in the hospital; and finally she appears to him in a dream and transforms him into a boy. As his sister, the Fairy is his female other (“you shall be my little brother, and I your good little sister” [213]), because she is the only other character to undergo the process of change as maturation: “When you left me, I was a little girl, and now you find me a woman, such a grown-up woman that I could almost be your mother” (283). She is Pinocchio’s only model of change as growth, and in the end, paradoxically, such change corresponds to a narrative disappearance: the puppet is as inanimate as the Fairy is unreachable. They are both gone.

The final transformation of the puppet into a boy makes of this story a bildungsroman, a novel of education; as such, and because of the recurrent didactic moments throughout the book, *Pinocchio* is about learning and about teaching. The book encourages the interpretation and necessary deconstruction of the world and its words, since for Collodi growing up “requires not only learning self-discipline but also learning to discriminate whom to trust and whom not to, learning to reciprocate others’ caring, and discovering when and

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why truth-telling is important" (Card 63). Through the Fairy, the theorist of lying as well as an expert in its practice, and through other enchanted beings, *Pinocchio* teaches the importance of reading the world correctly, of not letting oneself be duped by its liars and of lying when one must. Not all lies are bad: Geppetto lies when he tells Pinocchio that he sold his coat because he was too warm (135); Pinocchio must lie and claim to be a criminal in order to get out of jail (231). And though Pinocchio's nose grows four times, only two of those times does he lie, and he lies on other occasions without nasal consequences. The didacticism of Collodi's novel is ambiguous; its invitation to social conformity is persistently interrupted by the pleasure of playfulness, by an awareness of the centrality of conflict and struggle to the process of growing up, and by a biting criticism of schools and of organized teaching and learning in general.

Thus the Fairy's short-legged lies are the most complex of all: she claims to be dead when Pinocchio first meets her ("I am dead too" [183]), she pretends to die of grief because of Pinocchio's abandonment and informs him of his role in her demise (257); she masquerades as a bourgeois woman in the Island of the Busy Bees and denies her true identity (283). Short-legged as they are, these lies, though not immediately self-indicting as the long-nosed ones, do not go far, and Pinocchio quickly discovers the truth. Then there is the Goat scene. A goat in the middle of the sea is as incongruous as the color of the Fairy's hair. Surely the Fairy could have picked a more helpful animal to turn into—a sea animal, for example, would have flippers or fins instead of spindly legs ill-suited for swimming or rescuing. It does not seem that she really wants to be helpful, but rather that she is lying with her body and with her bleating.

In a kindergarten classroom, the reading of Collodi's *Pinocchio* "raises the issue of boys' mischief, the role of girls in the world of adventure and troublemaking, and loyalty to the family" (Kohl 99). The lessons in a college-level classroom will be similar and different at once. Is Pinocchio's mischief uniquely boyish? What is the role of the Fairy in his adventures? What does the very concept of family entail in the ideology of this book? Self-reflectively, it might be said that Pinocchio, like a feminist student, must learn through experience rather than through books. Just as in Collodi's book "true maturity is a function of individual insight which cannot be learned except through personal experience and reflection" (Heisig 28), so also does feminist pedagogy place "a high value on subjective experience as a route to understanding our lives and the lives of others" (Bell, Morrow, and Tastsoglou 23). What are the teaching and learning lessons that feminists can find in *Pinocchio*? What is, first of all, the slippery border between reality and the imagination, between lying and telling the truth? In some cases this distinction may be obvious—money, after all, does not grow on trees: the reader knows this, if Pinocchio at first does not. But sometimes distinguishing between truth and falsehood requires sophisticated skills: the blue-haired Fairy is a practiced user of didactic deception, of lies "flavored with pedagogy" (Mangelli 91). Her power over Pinocchio is parental, economic, intellectual, and

physical. Students and teachers might discuss the relation between power and teaching, between power and learning, and how it affects every pedagogical approach, whether self-consciously or not. In order to develop this question, it is helpful to go back to some teaching moments in Collodi's text.

Though the Fairy is the only female character of any importance in the text, Italian is a grammatically gendered language, so the many animals that crowd Collodi's book are all necessarily male or female. Thus, the Fox, "la Volpe," is female, and the Cat, "il Gatto," is male; the martens that Pinocchio captures while in his canine disguise are "le faine," and, talkative females that they are, they wake the sleeping puppet "with their chatter" (253). Closer to the Fairy, as her mouthpieces or even (the reader is led to wonder) her incarnations, are three other female beasts: "la Lucciola" (240), the "dear little Firefly" who teaches Pinocchio, caught in an animal trap, about the wrongness of stealing ("Hunger, my boy, is not a good reason for appropriating what is not ours" [241]); "la Marmottina" (376), "a pretty little Marmot" (373) and the only female resident of Funland, who instructs the donkey-eared Pinocchio about the effects of laziness, the dangers of bad companions, and the futility of regret ("all lazy boys . . . must end up sooner or later by turning into little jackasses" [377]); and "la Lumaca" (336), the Snail with the "little lighted lamp on her head" (335), who is reminiscent of the Firefly and whose talk of the Fairy's sleep ties her to the marmot (a hibernator and an icon of sleep in the European tradition).

The Snail, insistently didactic, is the Fairy's closest associate and the most passive-aggressive of the lot. Unlike the other two, she has few words of wisdom for Pinocchio and little verbal pedagogy; her lessons are practical, experiential. She inflicts frustration through her slowness, which is (intentional more than proverbial—she is quite fast when it comes to helping the Fairy in the last chapter, when the Snail "darted off like a lizard in the torrid days of August" (457). She also frustrates by presenting the famished Pinocchio with bread, a roast chicken, and four apricots—made, respectively, of chalk, cardboard, and alabaster (341). Barely illuminating as a firefly, mostly sleeping as a marmot, excruciatingly slow as a snail, the Fairy's female teaching assistants resemble the positive male animals in function (the Cricket, the White Blackbird, and the Parrot) yet differ from them in their proverbial weakness—of light, wakefulness, or speed. Among them, it is the Snail that claims primary importance, not only because, unlike most other teaching animals, male or female, she appears more than once but especially because, like the Fairy, she lies, deceives, and teaches with actions more than with words.

The Snail's feminist pedagogy, as we might call it, is not averse to didactic lies, and the teaching by experience she incarnates and enforces proves more effective than Geppetto's or the Cricket's verbiage. Their traditional, word-centered pedagogy is more easily destabilized by the act of lying—itsself an activity that is usually verbal. But the slowness the Snail manifests to Pinocchio is a lie, a metaphor for the short legs that she, a gastropod, does not have; the food she gives to

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him is a lie, hard and inedible however desirable it looks; and the story about the Fairy in the hospital, like the earlier one about the Fairy sleeping, is also probably a lie: how is the reader supposed to believe it? That the Fairy is hospitalized and in need of Pinocchio's financial assistance is the last pedagogical lie in the book, intended to give Pinocchio a final opportunity to forget the selfish puppet and assume the body of a good boy. Pedagogically, it works: he learns and changes. But we don't know how his new identity will turn out for Pinocchio, as the Fairy's words have not always been truthful. That his life as a boy will be better than his life as a puppet might well be the Fairy's last lie. The legs of this lie may be short, but Pinocchio, once again, trips on them all the same.

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