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Article publié le 25 juin 2023.

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Sleep, sleep,

you’re as beautiful as gold,
my heart hurts
my breast hurts;
my veins are dry
dry of blood
my son, I cannot cry.
Traditional lullaby from Sardinia [1]

Introduction

1 This paper aims to analyse textually the lullabies collected throughout the Italian territory and dated between the late 19th and late 20th centuries as an alternative to the narrative that considered women as angels of the hearth, whose main purpose in life consisted of achieving marriage and raising children (Parca 1959: 10, Willson 2011, Revelli 1985): an ideal deeply rooted in the geographic and political territory that we now call the Italian Republic, with differences among social strata, regions and historical periods. Many explicit oppositions to this view of the woman’s body crossed the 20th century, rooted in intellectual awareness and political action [2]. However, the popular lullabies analysed here were not born of the programmatic intentions of Italian feminism but still expressed a deeply critical and intergenerational narrative that was generated and passed down among the women most affected by the patriarchal structure of society.

2 Nurtured by the protected environment of domestic walls, embedded in labour of care assigned almost exclusively to poor women, lullabies inhabit an intimate yet ambiguous space between wakefulness and sleep. In such a space, singing became an opportunity for women to express their voice, literally, through what Marina Warner defines as a way for “soothing [the singer] from daily routine burdens as much as communicating to another” (Warner 1998: 45). It has been claimed that this would be precisely the implicit function of cradle songs, hidden by the main aim of inducing the infant to sleep (Leydi 1977: 38; Bonnar 2014: 7). If we look closely at the meaning propagated by their text, lullabies thus become not only a place to vent fears and anxieties, but also a safe space to express dissatisfaction, weariness, and

anger (Warner 1998; Gandini, Sambrotta 2002; De Angelis 2006). In cradle songs recorded and transcribed by ethnographers and musicologists, we find death wishes for newborns, curses against husbands, regrets of motherhood, denunciations of the injustice of life’s condition, and, more rarely, dreams of a different life.

3 This kind of narrative differs profoundly from the one proposed by, e.g., fairy tales, a form of storytelling related to a similarly domestic setting and partly related to lullabies by the function of fostering sleep. Intended for an audience capable of understanding the content conveyed, they often become the tool for propagating a patriarchal vision of society, where motherhood is always a gift from heaven, often longed for, and marriage is the best possible reward (Warner 2014; Bottigheimer 1987).

4 The following analysis of the texts and recordings will help contextualise this specific kind of lullaby in a precise historical and social climate and evaluate their extent. A comparison with the Italian fairy tales collected by Calvino in 1956 will allow the highlighting of the peculiarities of these lullabies as a form of female counter-narrative, emphasising its implications, potential, and limitations. Far from the idea of elevating these cradle songs to revolutionary anthems challenging the dominant social order, but rather viewing them as voices of a widespread dissent transmitted from generation to generation in the context of the labour of care, this research aims to consolidate the recognition of lullabies as a corpus of counter-narratives born and circulated within the female-dominated domestic space: a potentially expanding archive of practices on how to build a common, critical identity beyond the borders of the spaces entitled to public and political interaction, beyond the borders of the bodies entitled to create a common discourse.

1. Millions of Italian women are unknown: historical and social context

5 “Millions of Italian women are unknown”– writes Gabriella Parca in the opening of her book *Le italiane si confessano* –“we speak the same

language, obey the same laws, yet we know nothing about them" (Parca 1959: 10). The volume, published in 1959, is an anthology of 8,000 letters collected by the journalist from women's magazines, whose "confession letters' pages" are populated by the desires and fears of "factory and rural workers, seamstresses, students, secretaries and housewives" from southern to northern Italy (Parca 1959: 14). These women live in the Italian Republic, where they gained the right to vote and considerable emancipation (Willson 2011). Yet "despite the considerable differences in customs between north and south," Parca draws a picture that reconfirms "an unquestionable national unity," an image of women in which the idealisation of the bride and mother coexists with "a woman full of fears, often obsessed with the problems of sex, rich in impulses but inhibited by prejudices, generally dissatisfied with her own life, but unable to make the slightest attempt to change it." If her youth revolves around marriage, amid expectations and irrational prejudices, the marital experience often proves to be a bitter disappointment, overwhelmed by obligations of domestic household management and anger toward the husband, who is not requested to bear the same burden (Parca 1959: 9-10).

6 In a more recent essay, Perry Willson attempts to profile women's emancipation in Italy in the 20th century, outlining a situation similar to that recounted by Parca. Despite the huge social and political achievements in the last hundred years, the rapid modernisation of Italian society has proven unable to change many elements of the "tradition," as Willson calls it, that affects women's bodies and lives, still tied to a patriarchal vision of family where women have limited access to the public arena and are required to fulfil their nature in marriage, childbirth and domestic labour (Willson 2011: 335).

7 This condition, which sees women naturally linked to the domestic and family environment, is the background for this research, highlighting how precisely within this domestic and female-dominated space, inscribed within the work of care, it is possible to identify a narrative that undermines the dictates of this vision.

8 In an article published on *Nuovi Argomenti*[3] after his recording campaign in southern Italy, musicologist Alan Lomax claims: "Is it any wonder that the women of this land wail their children to sleep? The women bear the heaviest burden of pain in this Southern Italian

world” (Cohen 2005: 159). In his debatable view of southern Italy’s social system, the act of singing lullabies becomes the only space to channel rages, fears and grief (Cohen 2005: 159).

9 In his analysis, there is an echo of the words of Federico Garcia Lorca (Ranisio 2016: 251), who in his text *Las nanas infantiles* (1928), poetically researches the origin of the *aguda tristeza* (deep sadness) that pervades Spanish cradle songs, tracing it back to their singers: “poor women burdened with children, a cross often too heavy for them to bear” [4].

10 While Lomax’s idea of lullabies as a space for free female expression is reflected in the work of many scholars (Leydi 1977; Del Giudice 1988; Gandini, Sambrotta 2022; De Angelis 2006, Ranisio 2016), the differentiation proposed by the musicologist on the status of women between northern and southern Italy opens up a broader geographical question.

11 The regional differences which have existed and do exist in the history of the political and territorial entity we now call Italy are unquestionable [5], especially if we consider the time frame covered by this research, whose oldest examples date back to the 1880s and the most recent to the 1980s, a period during which the Kingdom of Italy turns into a Republic and even peripheral country borders change [6].

12 An extensive discussion of such differences exceeds this paper’s aims and length. For the purpose of this research, I will therefore consider the lullabies recorded and registered on the political and geographical Italian territory which have already been addressed as *Italian* lullabies in several studies (Leydi 1977; Del Giudice 1988; Gandini, Sambrotta 2002; Saffioti 2020). In particular, I will analyse lullabies’ ability to recount the grief of women’s condition, which, contrary to Lomax’s view, presents great similarities between southern and northern regions. I will show that these similarities reverberate in the lullabies coming from distant locations, which similarly and violently attack the absence of the husband/father or invoke the child’s death, so the exhausting job of rocking and soothing the infant will come to an end.

13 In the words of these lullabies, performed at great physical and temporal distances by women who lived in different worlds, it is possible to read what English musicologist Leslie Daiken, in his *The Lullaby*

Book (1959) calls "singing inward," that is, "the moment when, in a song ostensibly *sung to her child*, a woman must necessarily inject restlessness and strenuous thoughts, right at the height of caring for the child she has given birth to" (Daiken 1959: 33; author's italics), a way to "get a glimpse of the external tension and charades of life" (Daiken 1959: 33). The caregiver is then singing not only for the child, but also for herself, and for all the bodies that will inherit these female intergenerational narratives.

2. Methodology

14 The study of lullabies –considered in this case not as art songs but as anonymous compositions coming from popular tradition– implies some methodological difficulties that need to be addressed before proceeding.

15 In the first place, this research is based entirely on the lyrics of lullabies, supporting and deepening the theory that sees them as a place of venting and expressing disappointment to the female condition, thus considering the content as a conscious expression of anger, dissatisfaction, fatigue and fear (Leydi 1977; Del Giudice 1988; Gandini, Sambrotta 2002; Ranisio 2016; Saffioti 2020) – as Roberto Leydi and Michele L. Straniero called it: the "secondary or implicit" function of lullabies, compared to the "primary and explicit" aims to induce sleep in the child (Leydi 1977: 39, Saffioti 1981: 86). This research intends then to stress the importance of lullabies as a safe space for women's free expression, analysing its extension in the Italian context and the different forms of counter-narratives that can be recognised in it.

16 The analysed lullabies, however, were meant to be performed: their existence and formulation are closely linked to the rhythmic structure of the song, which is part of an act of care. Many scholars have pointed out how the cadenced rhythm of the lullabies and the accompanying swaying of the body bring cradle songs closer to funeral laments, further emphasising the connection of lullabies with the desperate condition of women who sang them (Lomax 1956: 128; De Martino 1975: 112; De Simone 1977: 23). Despite recognizing the structural importance of rhythm and sound in cradle songs, however, the study of this component exceeds the limits of this research, while paving the way for further possible insights in the future.

17 The volatility of the object of study and the many variations introduced virtually by each performer (often illiterate, heiress of an oral tradition and singing by heart) have made it complex to identify a reference archive, not extracted from directly collected sources but from historical records and written reports by previous researchers.

18 The arguments presented in this paper are the result of archival research conducted on written and oral sources. While the extension of the research to the present day and the very nature of lullabies – transmitted orally and susceptible to constant change– does not make the results definitive, the extensively analysed sample covers the temporal and spatial range under consideration.

2.1. Written sources

19 An extensive work of comparison between the many collections of more or less local cradle songs was carried out by journalist and folklorist Tito Saffioti, editor of *Le Ninne Nanne Italiane*, a collection of 200 lullabies’ dialect texts with Italian translation, that represents the main written source of this text. In the introduction to the volume, Saffioti harshly attacks earlier researchers, who described lullabies as reassuring songs, expressions of an idyllic mother-child relationship, pointing out that “far from prying ears, the woman has a way to give vent to her sorrows and frustrations, something that in other, more socialised, singing occasions was not possible for her.” The scholar divides cradle songs into “convenient” and “functional” categories (Saffioti 2021: 17), including one named “echoes of women’s condition in cradle songs,” composed by 33 lullabies whose lyrics explicitly refer to women’s fatigue in managing the role of wife-mother and in performing reproductive work, as well as to their anger toward the husband, who does not experience the same conditions.

20 This research embraces the categorisation effort by Saffioti, but also proposes to broaden the criteria that describe a female counter-narrative.

21 What Saffioti categorises as “echoes of female condition” are references to the exhausting drudgery of housekeeping and care work (e.g. “The mother who made you is consumed”[7]) and to the anger at her husband (e.g. “My husband is sleeping in bed/I am here moving

the cradle [...] My husband is in the tavern/Always drinking and playing" [8]). For the purpose of this research, they will be called "passive lament", a critique of the existing condition that does not propose alternative solutions.

22 An analysis of the social context in which these cradle songs originated and were passed down, however, allowed us to classify other motifs as counter-narrative to the canonical view of women and their role as mothers and wives.

23 In the introduction to *Le italiane si confessano* (1959), Gabriella Parca writes that, according to the stereotypical idea of Italian women, the ultimate imperative of girls is to find a husband and that, after marriage, they become "only mothers" often "too good" to the child (Parca 1959: 2). Consequently, I propose to consider as counter-narrative lullabies and also songs that lash out against this stereotype, depicting exhausted mothers who violently invoke death and illness, or sing about escape from marital relationships, with a more active attitude.

24 On the one hand, there are lullabies in which the singer wishes to be freed of her labour thanks to the death of the child (e.g. "Sleep, may you die/may the priests take you away" [9]). Saffioti classifies these lullabies as "Threats to the child. Sickness, death fear." Threatening the child with violence or deprivation so he/she falls asleep is an attested mechanism of the lullaby (Del Giudice 1988; Gandini, Sambrotta 2002; Ranisio 2016; Saffioti 2020). In the examples that will be given, however, the invocation of the child's death is not recalled as an incentive for sleep, but as a release for the mother.

25 On the other hand, I propose to consider as *counter-narrative* lullabies those describing the extramarital affairs of the singer, breaking the stereotype of fidelity to the husband (Parca 1959; Willson 2001). In these cases, the singer openly talks about her lover and even alludes to his actual paternity of the child. Saffioti classifies this kind of lullabies as *playful and various*.

26 Since both the death wishing and the extramarital themed lullabies describe situations that actively challenge the real one, I propose to classify them as "active lamentation."

2.2. Oral sources

27 In addition to the valuable written archive created by Saffioti, an oral archive collected since 1948 by the National Center for Popular Music Studies, founded in collaboration with RAI, constitutes an important reference for this research. The Bibliomediateca of the National Academy of Santa Cecilia (which holds the collection, offering online and in situ consultation) describes the ethnomusicology archives as “precious recordings of Italian music of oral tradition, the result of the tireless work of Giorgio Nataletti, Diego Carpitella, Ernesto De Martino, Alan Lomax[10] and other scholars who passionately devoted themselves to the collection and study of these repertoires.”[11] The archive is available online and the collection is divided thematically, reporting the name of the person who made the recording, date and place.

28 The heterogeneity of the material, often performed in dialect, made realisation complex. A more comprehensive study of this type of source, linguistically, content-wise and –as mentioned above– musically, will be the subject of future development of this research.

29 Despite these difficulties, filtering the archive for “lullaby,” it was possible to identify 449 items. An initial approach to the archive allowed the study of 320 of these cradle songs from a content perspective. As for the written sources, the search focused on: explicit references to a condition of dissatisfaction and fatigue with the work of care (1); anger towards the husband (2); wishes for the death of the child (3); wishes for betrayal and escape from the marital condition (4).

2.3. Fairy tales

30 In the final part of the article, an attempt will be made to establish a comparison between lullabies and another form of storytelling, fairy tales. The latter are also addressed to a child audience (albeit older than that of lullabies and thus able to understand what is being told), and are often female storytelling with the function of putting children to sleep, although not as bindingly as the act of singing lullabies (Warner 2014). Following the studies of feminist scholars such as Marina Warner and Ruth Bottigheimer, who reread folk tales not as “primordial, intact vessels of peasants’ knowledge, but as an expres-

sion of collectors’ and authors’ values, both time-bound and class-bound” (Warner 2014: 133), I will attempt to establish a comparison between lullabies and Italian fairy tales, looking for the same explicit references to fatigue and rejection of care work, anger toward the husband, death wishes to the child and desires for extramarital affairs.

31 The reference archive is the collection of Italian fairy tales made by Italo Calvino in 1956, containing 200 tales from every Italian region translated from their respective dialects. Calvino was not the direct collector of the tales, but worked on pre-existing folklorist collections, comparing and selecting books of Italian fairy tales created by past folklorists and translating the tales into Italian. The translation was made with “scruples of accuracy and claims of documentations” as he himself states in the introduction to the volume (Calvino 1956: 19).

2.4. Through men’s eyes

32 In the introduction to his collection of fairy tales, Calvino emphasises the authorial peculiarities of the various folklorists’ collections he has worked on (despite defining their work as “scientific”), as well as the idiosyncrasies of his own translation (Calvino 1956: 15). His remarks open up an important reflection that must be addressed before proceeding with the analysis: the necessity to go through the filtering, choosing and translating done by musicologists, anthropologists and folklorists over the past century, and, even more, the acknowledgment that these scholars are mostly men. Although there is a significant number of recent publications by female scholars who have worked on Italian lullabies (to quote some of them: Del Giudice 1988; Gandini, Sambrotta 2002; Orazzo 2016; Ranisio 2016), the primary sources on which they are based were recorded and transcribed by men. On the other hand, most of the few examples of 20th century studies of lullabies carried out by women reinforce the “traditional” view of lullabies as songs evoking an idyllic bond between mother and child [12] (Paccassoni 1939: 83; Naselli 1948: 39).

33 In addition, the male scholars and researchers directly involved in lullaby recording campaigns report in their studies the difficulty of convincing women, even those who were gladly willing to perform

other kinds of songs, to perform lullabies (Leydi 1972: 203; Cohen 2005: 160). We cannot ignore the fact that these factors surely influenced the collection of lullabies that are the subject of this research, both qualitatively and quantitatively. However, a female-driven counter-narrative manages nevertheless to emerge from the recordings interrupted by embarrassed laughs and silences: the voices of women who transformed the intimacy of domestic space into a place to sing of their dissatisfaction with the world as they knew it, transmitting their vision, claims and desires from body to body, from generation to generation, until today.

3. Italian lullabies: counter narration and female agency

34 The persistence in southern Italy of cultic-religious forms with a ritual function – strictly linked to rhythmic movements and music - capable of providing a relief for the most oppressed components of society has been extensively studied. In his *La terra del rimorso* (1961), Ernesto De Martino points out how the exorcism of the so-called "tarantate" is strongly linked to the need, mostly female, to give voice to frustration and desire for escape from an oppressive social role [13].

35 This section aims to emphasise how the same liberating function can be found outside the cultic environment throughout the Italian territory – not only in the South – in the domestic and female-dominated dimension of home and care work, exploring the possibility of a form of everyday, intergenerational and communal resistance.

36 To do so, the following paragraphs will take an in-depth look at the contents of Italian lullabies recorded in the late 19th and 20th centuries as a form of female counter-narrative of women’s everyday life and self-perception in society, attempting to quantify the presence of this stream of lullabies amidst the immense and volatile variety of sleep invocations and then proceeding with the analysis of the aforementioned different contents.

3.1. Singing the grief: a few numbers

37 The existence of a very specific type of lullaby, used by singers to give space to their fears or disappointment, to vent their anger and frustration is recognised by a vast number of scholars. But how relevant is this typology compared to the huge variety of cradle songs, prayers to the Madonna and St. Nicholas, invocations of sleep and wishes for a happy life that compose the immense and varied heritage of Italian lullabies (Saffioti 2020: 15)?

38 As described above, the reference archive for this research is composed of 200 written lullabies and 320 recordings.

39 Within the archive of *Ninne nanne italiane* edited by Tito Saffioti, the recognition of “counter-narrative lullabies” has been facilitated by the previous categorisation by the scholar, whose chapter devoted to “echoes of women’s condition in cradle songs” matches the selection criteria mentioned above. The chapter consists of 33 transcriptions of texts out of 200 in total. To these it is necessary to add at least 5 texts categorised as “playful and various” (mentioning extramarital relationships) and 6 categorised as “threats to the child” (invoking death and illness on the child), for a total of 44 lullabies, 22% of the total. The approach to the oral archives presented some factual difficulties, due to the regional variants of the languages and the audio quality. Within the archive of the Bibliomediateca, it was possible to recognise 25 lullabies explicitly mentioning the contents listed above (about 8%).

3.2. Singing grief: a classification proposal

40 I have already mentioned that, taking into account the explicit content of the lullabies, the cradle songs will be divided into passive laments –1) complaints about women’s condition and childcare labour and 2) insults to the husband, whose condition is freer since he is exempted from domestic labour– and active laments –3) threats or death wishes for the child, often accompanied by a vision of a better life without motherhood and 4) the imagination of an escape from marriage and domestic life. However, it is clearly impossible to

identify fixed categories or to avoid spilling and overlapping between the different aspects of a theme that is always the same: the hiatus between life as one would like it (or a life that would be bearable) and life as it is.

3.2.1. Passive Laments: Complaints and fatigue derived from women’s condition and the labours of childcare

41 In the words of these cradle songs, we find exasperation and weariness for a fate that has not been chosen and to which there seems to be no alternative. In lullabies collected in Venice in the late 19th century, the mother compares herself to green wood slowly consumed, while singing:

> Green wood never makes a flame
> Sleep my good, sleep my hope
> My hope, my hope from the cradle
> The mother who made you is consumed
> Mama is wearing out and wearing out
> As she sings to this child [14].

42 The singer even wonders what is keeping her from committing suicide:

> […] The day never comes
> Oh who can keep me
> From killing myself?
> Help mama
> I can’t take it anymore! [15]

43 More commonly, many of the lullabies recorded all over Italy give rhythm to the song with the refrain “it takes so much patience” [16], sometimes adding “this child finds no peace/I do not like this life” [17].

44 However, we can consider this type of lamentation the least explicit and violent. They take into account issues related to a broader condition of poverty, and consider the harshness experienced by both parents: another of the most recurrent refrains in the recordings, “your

Mummy/Daddy suffers the moon”[18], refers to the father and the mother with the same frequency.

3.2.2. Passive lament: Insults to the husband

45 In this type of lullaby, we find an explicit denunciation of the unfairness deriving from the marital relationship, the division of domestic labour and care work, a burden that falls exclusively on the mother. The father/husband is depicted as a slacker and often a drunkard, spending his time at the tavern and leaving to his wife the burden of childcare and housekeeping:

> Sleep, son of a friar
> Go to the Mass your Daddy says
> In the Ghirlandena tavern
> Where he goes in the evening and in the morning[19]

46 Or:

> Ninna su, ninna giù,
> Mama struggles and can’t take it anymore.
> Papa eats sausages
> And Mama struggles with the kids
> Papa eats sausages
> And Mama struggles with the daughter
> Papa drinks wine from the barrel
> And Mama struggles with the son
> Papa eats at the tavern
> And Mama struggles anyway[20].

47 The woman/wife, on the other hand, is condemned to her condition:

> The one who sings is married,
> hear her in the voice that has dropped
> hear her in the voice and in the pain
> the married one has no more good[21].

3.2.3. Active lament: threats or death wishes for the child

48 As already mentioned, this typology partly echoes an extremely common construction mechanism in lullabies, such as: ‘if you don’t sleep, something bad will happen to you’, threatening the child with extremely violent and physical menaces. E.g. a lullaby recorded in Isernia in 1978 sings: “sleep or I will kill you” [22].

49 Focusing on a female counter-narrative, however, what has been looked for in the lullabies’ lyrics for this study is not this kind of threatening negotiation to induce sleep (recognisable by the structure *if you…I will*, *sleep or I will…*), but rather the very moment when the act of singing turns into an actual invocation of death upon the child, directly linked with the mother/singer’s liberation.

50 E.g. in a lullaby recorded in Modica, Sicily, dated at the end of the 19th century, the invocation of sleep turns into a surprisingly violent desire for helpless death for the child, culminating in the mother’s exclamation *my God, I wish I could be so lucky*:

> Sleep, sleep of death,
> come to my house, I’ll wait,
> come to my house and let me rest
> Sleep, son, my pain,
> Old cloth and wet rope…
> The Bad Beast comes and takes him away
> Sleep son, my pain,
> Rocking you bothers me:
> violent inflammation and a small new coffin
> Sleep, pneumonia during the night!
> Deaf doctors and dead pharmacists!
> My god, I wish I could be so lucky [23].

51 Another example, recorded in Tuscany and reported by Saffioti, seemingly evokes an explicit death spell on the child:

> Sleep, may you die,
> may the priests take you away,
> may they take you to the cemetery,
> go to sleep, my sweet angel [24].

52 The lullaby has been included in the authorial collection of Italian folk music, such as *La veglia* by Caterina Bueno (1996), a folklorist and researcher herself, who devoted her work to giving a new voice to traditional rhythms [25]. The singer performs a longer version of the cradle song, from which, before the death invocation for the child, the first lines underline the difficulties and fatigue of the mother (“What are you doing in this world?/ I am doing what I can / with my child on me”) [26].

53 As Marina Warner argues, the evocation of an actual fear (in this case of the child’s death in sleep) can be read as a defence and averting mechanism: say it out loud to make it go away (Warner 1998: 70). However, the striking opposition of the stereotype of the “too loving” Italian mother (Parca 1959: 9) and the sense of liberation explicitly linked with the child’s death and the end of the burden of the labour of care makes these lullabies relevant as a form of counter narration.

3.2.4. Active lament: Extramarital relationships

54 In opposition to the stereotype of the good, faithful wife (Parca 1959: 10), many lullabies describe –not without a hint of irony– extramarital relationship of woman who is singing. The lyrics propose no real alternative life, but rather escape from the marital condition through cheating. Despite the strongly Catholic moral Italian landscape (Willson 2011: 334) the man with whom the official husband is cheated on, very often ends up being a priest:

> Nanna, la nanna, la nanna,
> the priest has your Mama,
> if you don’t believe it,
> go home and you’ll see it,
> if you can’t find him,
> he’s hiding under the bed,
> on the table there are still six coins,
> on the nightstand,
> there is still the beret,
> on the chimney hood,
> there is still the snuff box,
> in the drawer,

> there is still the handkerchief,
> in the box
> there is still the cassock [27].

55 Similarly, the friar going from house to house to collect the “alms” can turn into a lover:

> Sleep, my dear
> The friar is coming to take the bread.
> Sleep, my dear,
> Your Daddy is on his way
> Dear friar, you have to go back now,
> So that my husband does not see you [28].

56 Eventually, the paternity of the child is attributed to the friar himself:

> Sleep, son of a friar,
> I’ll tell you who’s your Daddy:
> He is the priest of the Carità,
> Sleep sleepy [29].

57 A similar betrayal motif appears several times in the analysed oral archive, in a famous Ligurian refrain. Here, the mother uses the lullaby as an expedient for communicating to the lover outside the door that the husband is at home and that the clandestine meeting must be postponed:

> It was the wind that dropped the reed
> Baby go to sleep for Daddy wants to sleep
> I already understood everything you want to tell me
> I’ll put the food here and come back Monday [30].

58 From the lyrics given as examples, the marital contract –which according to Parca (1959) and Willson (2011) occupies an extremely important part in women’s public aspirations and life– is unapologetically put aside. There is no mention of guilt or shame: the relationship with a lover does not carry the same burden, and the same anger that characterise the relationship with the husband, but this relationship represents a form of freedom that must be hidden to him.

4. Lullabies vs fairy tales: the privilege of intimacy

59 So far, the object of analysis has been a strand of lullabies conveying, from a female point of view, different forms of counter-narration. The exceptionality of this kind of storytelling becomes even more evident when we compare it to other forms of narration, related to a similar world of childhood and care, and still deeply different: fairy tales and folktales.

60 In fairy tales, the reflection of the dynamics that govern everyday life and its morality can lead to a fruitful comparison with the nocturnal and industrious world of lullabies, while taking into consideration the profound differences between the two forms of storytelling, in terms of content, form, function and, above all, placement or setting. If the lullaby is sung privately for an audience that does not understand-the babies- or that shares the position of the singer - other women - the fairy tale is intended for a more public setting, a sentient audience that fully understands the content, or can even be educated through it (Zipes 1988: 12). As already mentioned, this last part draws on the work of feminist scholars who studied fairy tales not as “intact vessels of peasant wisdom” (Warner 2014: 133), but as mirrors and echoes of the values shaping the world they inhabit.

61 Feminist criticism in the second half of the twentieth century devoted a considerable effort to deconstructing this aura of primordial knowledge and to revealing the social structure reiterated by fairy tales, to be considered “expressions of the collectors’ and authors’ values, which are both time-bound and class-bound” (Warner 2014: 133). Ruth Bottigheimer, e.g., in her *Grimm’s Bad Girls and Bold Boys* (1987), demonstrated how the strong educational aim and religious frame of the Grimm brothers, especially Wilhelm, brought them to actively modify the tales from the 1812 first edition to the last and complete edition in 1857, physically silencing the presence of women, cutting their voices and all the scenes considered immoral so that the female protagonists end up being either naïve girls or evil stepmothers [31]. The Grimms’ publishing project, as analysed by Bottigheimer, which would result in one of the most widely circulated and influen-

tial bestsellers in human history, extends and applies the idea of fairy tales as a moral instrument.

62 This final paragraph aims to look for the same educational filter in the collection of 200 folk tales edited by Italo Calvino, as well as to search for the same themes analysed in the lullabies (dissatisfaction with female labour of care, anger against the husband, death wishes for the child and extramarital relationships). Despite representing another form of filter, once again male, the work by Calvino was not characterised by the same morally invasive methods adopted by the Grimm brothers, but on the contrary tried merely to translate the work of other folklorists from regional language to "an Italian [language] that is never too personal and never too faded, rooted as much as possible in dialect" (Calvino 1956: 15) [32].

63 As a result, female agency gains a much more meaningful space: female protagonists use their wits to solve complex situations, invent stratagems to get out of difficulties and achieve what they want.

64 Despite this, in the fast pace of the narratives, there is no space for the repetitive rhythm of laments about labour of care, or the burden of marriage and children as we can find explicitly in lullabies.

65 On the contrary, in more than half of the stories collected (122 out of 200), marriage continues to be the coveted happy ending, the best of all possible rewards. In about half of these 122 tales, moreover, the woman/promised wife (usually the daughter of a king) has no name or agency of her own: she merely appears in the last line, as a reward for the protagonist's work. There is no trace of criticism of domestic labour and husband inactivity, nor the desire to find a way out of the marital condition through cheating.

66 A similar finding applies to the burden of motherhood, which is never explicitly mentioned in any of the 200 tales. The care or presence of little children occurs just 15 times, and only in the form of absence or desire: the woman (usually a queen) is unable to get pregnant and is willing to make deals even with evil characters to obtain an heir. While the lullabies seem to record an endless, very slow, exhausting time of caring –often nocturnal– time in fairy tale runs very fast, and has no way of considering the microscopic storytelling that constitutes the heart of the lullabies previously analysed.

67 This heart ends up being completely erased, and fairy tales help to reinforce the existing view of society and the role of women in it. In this gap between the two forms, we can see the difference between what actually ‘happens’ and what ‘is taught’ , between the official narrative and what can be said when no one but those who share the condition of coercion and exploitation are listening. The domestic walls are the place within which this exploitation takes place, but they can also become the place where the condition of inequity is recognised and addressed, where women learn how to sing their dissent.

5. Final considerations

68 Starting from the assumption that cradle songs can be considered as a form of conscious narration, by analysing their lyrics, this paper aimed to identify, within the broad panorama of Italian lullabies collected between the 19th and 20th centuries, a specific corpus of contents, demonstrate its consistency, and analyse the variety of themes addressed. Finally, a comparison with another form of storytelling, the more public and ‘educational’ shape of folk and fairy tales, allowed us to highlight the exceptional nature of the lullaby’s narrative. Overall, this analysis has delineated a form of singing that is also an expression of dissent, linked to a specific socioeconomic condition and handed down from house to house, from body to body, in an attempt at resistance against fatigue and against fear. It has also underlined how these kinds of lullabies do not work as revolutionary hymns. In these lyrics, the fate of women is in any case to become a wife/mother/caregiver/domestic labourer. There is no real counterproposal to this worldview, only a critique of it. Even the expressed desire of escape mostly revolves around a love relationship, although with another man, and nothing more.

69 Nevertheless, it remains the only space where this worldview is challenged, its naturalness creaking under the weight of impatience, anger, and grief. Lullabies remain a unique space of expression – thanks also to the exceptional nature of their origins, places, and the audience for which they are performed. This is a space of expression that in large part still needs to be investigated, expanding the chronological and physical boundaries through which rhythms and re-

frains are amplified, recognised, and reproduced to narrate a story that would otherwise remain silent.

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1 “Anninia anninia, / bellu ses ke-ì s’oro, / mi nde dolet su coro / mi nde dolen sas tittas; / sas benas meas sun siccas / siccas de sambene / fizu non poto pranghere”.

2 Referring mainly to the so called “second feminist wave” that involved Italy and much of the Western world in the 1970s. The activity of politicians, intellectuals, artists and activists led to such fundamental steps as the regulation of abortion (1978) and legalisation of divorce (1970). These were conquests often previously pursued by the Italian “first feminist wave,” whose “social feminism” committed to the rescue of lower class women and to ob-

taining universal suffrage, which in Italy was established only in 1946, after the great setback to women’s emancipation during the fascist regime (Malagreca 2006).

3 Cultural journal directed by A. Moravia and A. Carrocci. Lomax published on issue 17/18, year 1956.

4 https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/Lullabies.php Consulted 1 October 2022.

5 https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sulle-tracce-dell-identita-italiana-somiglianze-e-differenze-tra-le-regioni_%28L%27Italia-e-le-sue-Regioni%29/ Consulted 20 March 2023.

6 https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/l-italia-la-repubblica_%28Storia-della-civilt%C3%A0-europea-a-cura-di-Umberto-Eco%29/ Consulted 20 March 2023.

7 Venezia –Dalmedico 188, p.169– in Saffioti 2020: 24.

8 Brianza 1940, in *Ibid.*, 67.

9 Valdelsa 1989, in *Ibid.*, 85.

10 The quoted scholars are among the main contributors to the archive with their recordings. In particular: Giorgio Nataletti (1907-1972), ethnomusicologist and founder and director of the National Study Center for Folk Music, among his works a collection of thirty Italian lullabies (1934). Diego Carpitella (1924 – 1994), anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, professor at the National Academia of Santa Cecilia, was the protagonist of extensive recording campaigns with the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965). Their work resulted in a significant number of publications, e.g. *La terra del rimorso* (1961). Carpitella was also the Italian musicologist who accompanied the North American folklorist and musician Alan Lomax – self-exiled in Europe due to McCarthyism – in his extensive campaign in Italy, well documented in Plastino, Goffredo: 2008.

11 http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_6_0&numDoc=162, Consulted 21 January 2023.

12 To better understand the “traditional” interpretation of lullabies, cfr. Cioni 1973 and Lapucci 1987.

13 “Tarantate” women were believed to suffer a spider bite capable of forcing their bodies in a sort of possession, typically during the summer. Thanks to a dancing exorcism and the protection of Saint Paul, they would eventually be freed, only to be possessed again the following summer. Be-

sides Ernesto De Martino's studies, for an in-depth look at the connection between *Tarantismo* and female liberation see Cixous, Hélène and Clément, Catherine, *The Newly Born Woman*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 and the more recent Pecere, Paolo, *Il dio che danza. Viaggi, trance, trasformazioni*, Milano: Nottetempo, 2021.

14 "La legna verde non buta mai vampa: / dormi 'l mio ben, dormi la mia speranza. / Speranza mia, speranza mia de cuna: / la mama che t'ha fato se consuma. / La mama se consuma e se va consumando: / e a sto putelo la ghe va cantando" (Venezia –Dalmedico 188, p.169– in Saffioti 2020: 24).

15 "E co la nina / E co la nana / E co la nana / No se fa mai dì. / Oh chi e tien, / che no me scana? / Agiunto, mama / No posso più!" (Venice – Bernoni 1873, p 204– in *Ibid.*, 59).

16 "Che pazienza che ce vo'". Among others: Bibliomediateca dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, R 24 O n. 29, Alan Lomax, 1954, Celle sul Rigo, S.Casciano dei Bagni (Siena), R. 136b n. 8, Diego Carpitella and Rudi Assuntini, 1972, Marcianise (Caserta).

17 "Questo bimbo non ha pace/questa vita non mi piace". Bibliomediateca dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia R. 33 n. 74, Diego Carpitella, 1956, Torre Alta, Gubbio (Perugia).

18 "To ma/pa patis la luna". Among others: Bibliomediateca dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, R 61 n. 27/28/46, Antonino Uccello, 1961 Seveso (Milano).

19 "Fa' la nana, fiol d'un fré, / va' a la mèssa che dis tu pè / a l'ustareja dla Ghirlandèna, / ch'u i va sera e matèna" (Brisighella, Ravenna –Pergoli, 1884 p. 215–, in Saffioti 2020: 27).

20 "Ninna su, ninna giù, / Mamma tribola un ne po' più. / Babbo mangia salsiccioli, / mamma tribola co' figliuoli. / Babbo mangia la salsiccia, / mamma tribola co' la citta. / Babbo beve il vin d'ittino / Mamma tribola co'iccitino. / Babbo mangia all'osteria / Mamma tribola tuttavia" (Siena – Corazzini 1877–, in *Ibid.*, 63 and R 92 A n. 74, Diego Carpitella, 1965, Lierna – Arezzo).

21 "Quèla che cànta l'è 'na màredàda / Sentìla nèla òs la gh'è falcàda – ò / Sentìla nèla ò e nèle péne / La màredadàda nò la g'à piu béne – ò" (Brescia, 1972, in Saffioti 2020: 57).

22 "Ninna la nonna, ninna la nonna,/addormintiti mammà, ca si no ti mazzai" Fontesambuco di Agnone (Isernia) (Giancristofaro 1978, p. 31, in

Ibid., 76).

23 "Fa la vo': suonnu subbettu, / viniti a la ma casa ca v'aspiettu, / viniti prestu a ddàrmi rizzettu. / Fa la vo' figgiu ma tacca, / drappicidduzzu viècciu e corda fracca!... / veni lu Bruttu Bbestia e si lu 'nciacca. / Fa la vo' figgiu, ri boia, / ca lu tanto nacàriti m'annoia: / punta ri sangu, e casscitedda nova / A la vo'...punta di notti!... / Miérici surdi e sbizziali muorti!... / Oh Ddiu, c'avissi aviri sta 'rran sorti!... / A vo' e ffa la vo'" (Modica –Guastella 1887, p. 23-24–, in *Ibid.*, 89).

24 "Fai la nanna, che tu crepi; / ti portassino via i preti, / ti portassino al Camposanto, / fa la nanna, angiolo santo" (Valdelsa 1989 in *Ibid.*, 85).

25 http://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/biografie/caterina-bueno/ Consulted 20 February 2023.

26 Dondo dondo, dondo dondo / icché tu fai a questo mondo? / Io lo faccio e' ch'icché posso /con il mio bambino addosso. / Dirindina s'ha a fa' le frittelle, / dirindina le s'hanno a fa' belle. / Dirindina s'ha a fa' le frittelle, / ci manca l'olio e la farina; / se ci manca la padella e' si chiede alla vicina.

27 "Nanna, la nanna, la nanna, / l'arciprèute si tene la mamma, / si vui non lu creite / sciate a casa ca lu vidite / si vui non l'acchiate / sotto lu liette stai ammucciato / sopra lu tavline / l'ai rumase i sei carrini, / sopa la culunnette / l'ha rumase lu berretto, / sope la ciummunere / l'a rumase la tabacchera, / inta lu traturo / l'à rumase lu maccaturo / inta lu cascione / l'à rumase u zimmanone" (Grassano –Matera–, Recorded by Teresa Schiavone in 1953, in Saffioti 2020: 144).

28 Fa la nana, la mi' coca / e' vën' e' frë' a tö' la pagnota / Fa' la nana, la mi' feia, /e' tu' bab' l'è per la veia./ Fratezzen, mo turna infrì'/ he non ti vegga lo mi' marì' Cotignola, Ravenna (Randi 1981, p. 237 in *Ibid.*, 158).

29 "Fa la nanna, fjòl d'un frè, / ch'at dirò chi è al to papè: / l'è al curèt dla Caritè, / fa la nana indurmintè" (Cento, Ferrara –Borgatti 1968, p. 5– in *Ibid.*, 153).

30 "È stato il vento a far cader la canna / Bimbo fai la nanna che il babbo vuol dormir / Ho già capito tutto quello che mi vuoi dire / Appoggio qui il mangiare e torno lunedì". Among others: Bibliomediateca dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, R. 92.A . 42, Diego Carpitella, Arezzo, 1965.

31 E.g. see the chapter dedicated to the transformations in Cinderella's story over the different collection's editions (Bottigheimer 1987: 51 - 70).

32 Calvino's translation has been in any case showed to be not as neutral as the author claimed. See Beckwith, Marc (1987), "Italo Calvino and the Nature of Italian Folktales", in *Italica*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 244-262.

English

This paper aims to analyse textually the lullabies collected throughout the Italian territory and dated between the late 19th and late 20th centuries as a form of counter-narrative from the female point of view. Nurtured by the protected environment of domestic walls, embedded in the labour of care which was almost exclusively a duty of the poor class of women, lullabies inhabit an intimate yet ambiguous space between wakefulness and sleep, far from the educational and public context of other narrative forms. The content of a specific corpus of lullabies driving a female counter-narrative will be identified and analysed. The various themes included in the stream will be identified and illustrated. The analysis will help contextualise this specific kind of lullaby in a precise historical and sociological climate and evaluate their extent. A comparison with the Italian fairy tales collected by Calvino in 1956 will allow the highlighting of the peculiarities of the lullaby as a form of female counter-narrative, emphasizing its implications, potential, and limitations.

Français

Cet article vise à analyser le contenu des berceuses collectées sur tout le territoire italien, datées entre la fin du XIXe et la fin du XXe siècle, en guise de contre-narration du point de vue féminin. Produites dans l'espace domestique, partie intégrante du travail de soins réservé presque exclusivement aux femmes des classes pauvres, les berceuses habitent un espace à la fois intime et ambigu, loin du contexte éducatif et public d'autres formes narratives. Le contenu d'un courant spécifique des berceuses, véhiculant un contre-récit féminin, sera identifié et analysé. L'étude permettra de contextualiser ce type particulier de berceuses dans un climat historique et sociologique précis en évaluant leur portée. Enfin, les berceuses seront comparées aux contes de fées italiens recueillis par Calvino en 1956 afin de mettre en évidence les particularités de la berceuse en tant que forme de contre-narration féminine, en soulignant ses implications, son potentiel et ses limites.

Mots-clés

berceuse, Italie, contre-narration, female agency, contes de fées

Keywords

lullaby, Italy, counter-narration, female agency, fairy tales

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