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When chick lit meets *romanzo rosa*: Intertextual narratives in Stefania Bertola's romantic fiction

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Abstract: Stefania Bertola is a successful Italian writer of romantic fiction who creatively blends the codes and practices of *romanzo rosa*, Italy's tradition of popular romance, with narrative tropes and cultural trends set up by contemporary Anglo-American chick lit. This article examines how Bertola fosters the dialogue among old texts, new ones and their readership through comedy, parody and intertextuality, creating multiple levels of engagement and offering a vibrant and innovative approach to genre fiction.

About the Author: Federica Balducci holds a degree from Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy) and is a PhD candidate in Italian at Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand). Her thesis is a study of the reception and production of chick lit in Italy, investigating the recurring themes, narrative strategies and stylistic features deployed in the Italian novels not only against their Anglo-American models, but also in relation to Western popular media culture and the Italian tradition of *romanzo rosa*.

Keywords: Chick Lit, Federica Balducci, Italian chick lit, Italian popular fiction, media culture, popular culture, *romanzo rosa*, Stefania Bertola

Introduction

This article examines the work of Stefania Bertola (b. 1952), a prolific Italian writer of romantic fiction who creatively blends the codes and practices of *romanzo rosa*, Italy's tradition of popular romance, with narrative tropes and cultural trends set up by contemporary Anglophone chick lit. In the landscape of Italy's contemporary romantic fiction, where the dramatic and educational tones of *romanzo rosa* still permeate the genre in form and contents alike, Bertola's novels represent a truly innovative and refreshing

voice: one that has intertextuality, humour, and comedy as its key features. I discuss Bertola's original position within the genre through a reading of the four titles that constitute the core of her production: *Ne parliamo a cena* (*Let's Talk About It Over Dinner*), *Aspirapolvere di stelle* (*Star Hoover*), *Biscotti e sospetti* (*Biscuits and Suspects*), and *A neve ferma* (*Firm Slopes*).[1] As we shall see, in Bertola's writing the generic features at work in *romanzo rosa* and chick lit are not only acknowledged, but also rearranged and reinterpreted, resulting in a complex, innovative body of work that successfully overcomes literary and stylistic boundaries in genre fiction.

In order to understand Bertola's novels and their relationship with Anglophone chick lit and Italian *romanzo rosa*, it helps to have some sense of the latter tradition. To begin, then, I will give an overview of the *romanzo rosa*, followed by an account of the arrival of chick lit on the international stage, and more specifically in Italy. Finally, I will draw on scholarly work on parody and romantic comedy films to explore the role of humour, comedy and intertextuality in Bertola's fiction.

Romanzo rosa: an overview

Critic Eugenia Roccella defines the *romanzo rosa* (often shortened to *rosa*) as a modern literary product, the result of changes in the Italian publishing market that took place in the early twentieth century (31). In those years, the development of a modern economy, particularly in Northern Italy, led to the growth of a literate middle class that, along with economic wellbeing, was seeking social and cultural acknowledgment. Publishers identified different targets based on factual data such as age and gender as well as potential interests, and the *romanzo rosa* established itself as the genre written by women, for women, about women (Spinazzola *Modernità letteraria* 211). Its rise can be located in the early 1920s with publisher Salani's "La Biblioteca delle Signorine" (*The Young Ladies Bookshelf*), a series featuring sentimental stories with an edifying message and dedicated to upper-middle class young female readers (Ghiazza 137). Along with the occasional Italian author, the novels were mainly translations of English and French works;[2] as they were intended to have a pedagogical purpose for young women, female characters strictly adhered to the binary opposition between good and evil, that is, those who conformed to established moral and social codes of the time were awarded the happy ending, and those who failed at it were punished instead, quite often with death (Ghiazza 153). The success of the series prompted the reprint of the books a few years later under a new name, "I Romanzi della Rosa" (*The Novels of the Rose*), featuring a design characterised by a pink cover and a rose on the jacket, the graphic elements that would eventually label the genre itself.[3]

The popularity of such novels attracted the attention of other publishing houses that began releasing their own series. As Silvana Ghiazza maintains, in this phase the focus was not on the writers but almost exclusively on the imprint, which guaranteed the quality and tenor of the stories (136-37). While critics have mostly focused on the conventional aspects of the *rosa* novels produced during/within fascism, such as their homogeneous and repetitive formulas and their conservative representation of female fantasies, Robin Pickering-Iazzi holds a different and more challenging view. In *Politics of the Visible:*

Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism she analyses Italian romance fiction and its conventions during the interwar years, exploring the implicit and explicit politics present in these texts. Using a critical model elaborated by Teresa de Lauretis and Cora Kaplan in the context of female identification in narrative and cinematic fiction, Pickering-Iazzi convincingly argues that "[w]ithin the hegemonic system predominated by Fascist institutions and the Catholic Church, which promoted models of femininity dedicated to the role of wife and mother, cast respectively as political and sacred, the romance novel, and mass culture in general, represented an alternative authority on modern canons of beauty and fashion, etiquette, and love" (103). Likewise, Antonia Arslan and Maria Pia Pozzato say that one of the most significant traits of *rosa* narratives is their active role in inviting both the expression of and a discussion about sentimental and sexual issues in Italy's sociocultural landscape: "il rosa non si limita a raccontare l'amore e il sesso così come sono valorizzati e vissuti nella nostra società ma è anche un *invito* all'amore e al sesso" ("*rosa* does not just narrate love and sex as they are valued and approached in our society but is also an *invitation* to love and sex"; 1036).

The master of *romanzo rosa* was Liala (Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti Odescalchi, 1897-1995), who remains the most popular romance writer to date (Arslan and Pozzato 1039; Roccella 12); all her novels have been continually reprinted through the decades. Her career stretched from the early 1930s to the 1980s, and her life and writing are so deeply interwoven that they have become the *rosa*'s prototype and foundation stone (Lepschy; Roccella 53). A member of the Italian aristocracy, Liala married Marquis Cambiasi, almost twenty years her senior. Shortly after the marriage she met the aircraft pilot Centurione Scotto and the two fell in love. Cambiasi agreed to divorce but in 1926, before the paperwork could be completed, Scotto died while performing an acrobatic flight. Liala's first novel *Signorsì* (*Yes, Sir*) published in 1931 by Mondadori, is inspired by these events and became an instant bestseller (Lepschy 183-84).

According to Pozzato, *Signorsì* presents the "estetismo di massa" ("mass aestheticism") that would become a trademark of Liala's writing. Characterised by a sophisticated vocabulary and syntactical constructions, this style was rooted in the late-nineteenth century literary movement of *decadentismo* (Decadence), whose tones and values Liala absorbed and reworked in a more popular form, aimed at a broader readership (90). The main features of Liala's "mass aestheticism," Pozzato explains, are stunning heroines and stylish heroes, moral integrity, exquisite settings infused with a sense of grandeur, and refined tastes expressed through close attention to visual details, particularly when describing clothes, houses, cars and other material belongings (90). From a formal perspective, Anna Laura Lepschy identifies a strategy of "double focalization" in Liala's courtship plots; that is to say, the emotions of both male and female characters are granted equal visibility and importance in the story (186). There is no room here for a detailed analysis of Liala's place and in Italian literature and culture, as it would require a much lengthier discussion.[4] However, I would point to Pickering-Iazzi's fascinating analysis of *Signorsì*, which underlines the "culturally specific" form of the novel and considers it a landmark text in the genesis and development of a genre that, for the first time, was entirely "fashioned by Italian authors and stories" (99).

Indeed, Liala's success boosted the *rosa* publishing market and while she wrote well into the mid-1980s, many other authors came along as the genre evolved. Some of them soon disappeared into the crowd of an overpopulated genre, but others built close

relationships with their readers from the 1930s until the late 1970s through the pages of dedicated magazines, where they published their stories in instalments but also worked as journalists and often as personal advice columnists. As Roccella notes, simply by virtue of their novels' subject matter, *rosa* writers came to be perceived as motherly figures as well as experienced friends, so to speak, assisting readers with complicated questions on issues related to everyday life and emotions (76).

During the 1980s, however, the landscape of Italian publishing changed. In 1981 the leading worldwide publisher of serial romance, Harlequin Enterprises, joined forces with Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, the historical Italian publishing house that had been one of the first to actively engage with mass-market fiction since the late 1920s, and launched Harmony, a joint venture designed to publish exclusively serial romances in translation. Harmony became almost immediately the reference point for a new kind of romance fiction in Italy, one that decreed the death of the so-called "rosa artigianale," that is, the locally crafted *romanzo rosa*, in favour of new and imported serial romances (Roccella 109-14). The latter hit the marketplace with an abundance of titles ranging from historical to Regency to contemporary romance, and within a couple of years the success of Harmony novels among Italian readers was staggering: in 1983 readers were offered 25 new titles each month, all translated from English and quickly recognisable through definite visual features (Brodesco 42-45).[5] In fact, it could be said that Harmony brought romance back to the early 1920s, when the imprint, rather than the author, was the element that guaranteed the reader's fidelity to the genre.

From the 1980s onward the home-grown *rosa* production and its literary tradition, which were already struggling to reposition themselves in Italy's rapidly-changing society and publishing market, slowly disappeared under the weight of what Arslan and Pozzato have called "l'acritica colonizzazione da parte di modelli stranieri" ("the acritical colonisation by foreign models"; 1046). Those "modelli" included not only the serial Harmony romances, but also, after the 1990s a new genre of popular literature—chick lit—whose relationship with local Italian tradition would play out rather differently from the colonising pressure of Harmony.

The new kid in town: chick lit

Emerging in English-speaking countries in the mid 1990s with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, chick lit rapidly evolved into a worldwide cultural and literary phenomenon.[6] As Joanne Knowles maintains, chick lit novels feature "a female protagonist seeking personal fulfilment in a romance-consumer-comedic vein" (3). Knowles' definition highlights the multifaceted and comedic nature of the genre, which Claire Squires reinforces by arguing that nowadays Bridget Jones is "not only a term for a certain social type [. . .] but also shorthand for a certain sort of novel and a certain sort of success" (159). Indeed, the resounding success of Fielding's and Bushnell's works (for the latter due largely to its TV adaptation) resides in their hybrid status, located as they are at the crossroad of social commentary, escapist fiction and literary tradition.

In *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, the first comprehensive scholarly study of chick lit, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young point out the novelty factor that the genre

brought into the cultural and literary landscape of the mid-1990s worldwide. On the one hand, chick lit was a decidedly new kind of women's popular fiction, whose formal and stylistic features presented innovative elements such as the humorous tone used to negotiate sentimental relationships; on the other hand, write Ferriss and Young, these novels were explicitly "about and for" a new type of woman—middle-class, white, heterosexual and financially independent—caught in intricate discourses of consumerism, sexuality, race and class at the turn of the century (12). Some years later, the debate among scholars on the qualities and shortcomings of chick lit confirms that the genre is an intriguing subject for analysis, one that has been discussed equally as a marketing ploy, a "post-literary" and "post-romantic" cultural product, a genuine attempt at addressing the experiences and issues of contemporary women in Western society, and a commentary on feminism and its place in today's society (Whelehan; Smith; Harzewski; Modleski; Knowles). As Imelda Whelehan points out, chick lit must be acknowledged as "a tendency found in popular women's writing of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which alerts us to key concerns and themes also to be found in popular culture more generally" (*Teening chick lit*).

Whether happily embraced or forcefully rejected—by critics, writers and readers alike—the genre has generated a great deal of debate in the social, cultural, and literary arena, crossing geographical and linguistic boundaries. A *New York Times* article on international chick lit published in 2006 observed that parallel to the novel's success in English-speaking countries, translations of *Bridget Jones's Diary* immediately came out worldwide: in Italy, France and Japan in 1998, then in Hungary and Indonesia, to name but a few (Donadio). The novel's gesturing at both "triviality and seriousness," pointed out by Squires (160), fostered its appeal across the global market, building the base for subsequent variations. Alongside the translations of American and British authors, local publishers around the world promoted and launched domestic writers, who, for their part, addressed local socio-cultural needs and values. In 2002, freelance journalist Zsuzsa Rácz published a novel that was hailed as the "Hungarian Bridget Jones," prompting Nora Sellei to investigate the reception of both Fielding's character and her local counterpart in postcommunist Hungary (173-74). In calling for a new interpretative framework for Rácz's novel, Sellei maintains that while it openly acknowledged its debt to *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the book was also "rooted in a complex but subtle way in Hungary's postcommunist present," capturing in real time the changes in language, society, and culture of the country (179-85). Similarly, Jenny Mochtar Djundjung's study on chick lit in Indonesia offers a comparative reading of British and Indonesian texts that focuses on the representation and reception of key elements such as the female body and the single urban woman. Likewise, the rise in China of a new generation of young women writers engaging with themes such as consumerism, eroticism and urban lifestyle has been dubbed "Chinese chick lit" and read in the context of the recent changes in the market economy of the country, where discourses of globalised consumer culture, female empowerment and neoliberal agency borrowed from Western postfeminist media culture are shaping—but are also being shaped by—urban Chinese women at ease with mainstream commodities and languages from the West (Chen; Ommundsen).

In Italy, the translation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (*Il diario di Bridget Jones*) came out in 1998 and was received with great enthusiasm; two years later the HBO's *Sex and the City* was aired in Italy, becoming an instant hit. In 2002, Mondadori teamed up with Harlequin

Enterprises for a second time, looking to recreate their success with the Harmony books, and brought the chick lit concept into the country through Red Dress Ink (RDI). Established in 2001 as the dedicated chick lit imprint of the Canadian-based romance fiction giant, RDI claimed to "define, as well as offer books relevant to, the 21st-century woman [. . .] leading women's fiction with attitude" (RDI Writing Guidelines).[7] In presenting the new genre to the Italian market, editorial director Alessandra Bazardi emphasised its innovative nature (compared to the traditional romance fiction published by Harmony until then), its role as social commentary, and the new and younger readership it was attracting (De Luca). In 2004, the *New York Times* featured an article about the first Women's Fiction Festival held in Matera (Italy), underlining "trendy upstarts like chick lit" as particularly successful in the country: "Italians [. . .] have taken to chick lit, the post-Bridget Jones literary phenomenon, and Italy has been the strongest foreign market for Red Dress Ink, Harlequin's chick lit imprint" (Povoledo).[8] Indeed, other Italian publishers—particularly the ones with a solid background in popular romance—had started to launch dedicated chick lit series, such as Sperling & Kupfer's "Pandora Shocking," Salani's "Femminili," and Newton Compton's "Anagramma." As with Harmony, initially such series offered only translations, introducing the Italian readership to the most successful American and British chick lit writers, but local authors became gradually more and more visible.

Some Italian critics and reviewers have recently started to examine the sociocultural reasons behind the genre's success and the generational representations that emerge from its contents, yet the object of their enquiry has been confined to foreign chick lit novels translated into Italian, with local writers going mostly unnoticed (Corbi; De Luca; De Rosa; Giovanetti; Manera). Admittedly, for many of these local writers, "chick lit" was a ready-made commercial label that would bring them visibility in the marketplace, and their works simply imitated the genre's key features, roughly adapted to the Italian context. Others, however, begun to develop their own take on the genre and produced a genuinely domestic version of it. This is the case of Bertola, who retrieved the abandoned *rosa* tradition and blended it with chick lit themes and tropes, delivering an original narrative that, in the context of Italy's popular genres, successfully reinterprets both genres in light of humour and comedy (Lepri).

Celestino Deleyto's *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (2009), a study on romantic comedy films that examines the genre from both a cultural and historical point of view, is particularly helpful for the analysis of Bertola's approach to chick lit and popular romance. Deleyto defines romantic comedy as the genre "which uses humour, laughter and the comic to tell stories about interpersonal affective and erotic relationships" (30). Rather than focus on the genre's narrative structures, which in romantic comedy must follow a fixed pattern, Deleyto draws our attention instead to the transformative power of the comic perspective. In Deleyto's view, the presence and scope of humour in romantic comedies has an importance far beyond merely making these films enjoyable; in fact, humour becomes instrumental for the interpretation of all the many issues and themes at work in the story. Certainly, writes Deleyto, romantic comedies draw from ideas about love and relationships that are specific to the cultural and historical context in which they are created, and they always feature a tidy closure where these ideas are wrapped up in a satisfying (if not predictable) ending, but it is humour that provides the unique angle from which these ideas are read and evaluated. The comic perspective, Deleyto continues, accounts for the way the characters interact and evolve in spite of their sociocultural habits and constraints, creating

"a space of transformation and fantasy" where both the characters and the audience understand the complexity of sentimental relationships (45-46).

Although elaborated within film genre studies, Deleyto's observations can be applied to narrative fiction as well, and in particular to Bertola's works, where humour and comedy play a fundamental role in storytelling, creating a space of "transformation and fantasy" through the playful deployment of various narrative codes and conventions. In this respect, Bertola's technique is better understood in light of Margaret A. Rose's *Parody / Meta-fiction*, in which she discusses parody as "a form of meta-fiction" or "a technique of stylistic 'imitation' and distortion" (19). Central to Rose's argument is the idea of parody as "the meta-fictional 'mirror' to the process of composing and receiving literary texts" (59), a concept that she explains through the analysis of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Rose notes that Austen "marks herself as a reader of the text, the value of which she is questioning [and] ironically mirrors her use of parody in the use of parody by one of her characters"; this way, says Rose, the mirror adds to its "mimetic" function a "dialectical" one, as it works in several directions at once, inside and outside of the novel itself, making "characters, author and reader [all] simultaneously the targets and the tool of satire" (70-72). Rose also introduces the notion of the transformative power of parody, which she locates in its structure:

> [T]he structure of the parody—based on the imitation, quotation or distortion of the target text creates a dialectic of imitation and transformation, superseding the act of imitation itself, and uniting the parody work with another text and literary tradition, while at the same time changing the direction of this tradition through its refunctioning of its models. (158)

Such process of transformation through "imitation, quotation or distortion of the target text" holds with regard to Bertola's novels, and is at the core of her creative engagement with cultural and stylistic models derived from opposite directions: the tradition of *romanzo rosa* and contemporary chick lit. If Italian popular romance had always been permeated by a "serietà assorta" (Spinazzola *Immaginazione divertente* 54), a distinctive tone of sombreness in support of the educational message that the story was required to deliver to its (female) readers, Bertola borrows the comedic nature of Anglo-American chick lit in order to infuse with an ironic tone the melodramatic seriousness that is *romanzo rosa*'s hallmark and its most enduring legacy.

Chick lit, *romanzo rosa* and comedy in Bertola's fiction

A first example of Bertola's use of irony and comedy to mediate chick lit and *rosa* comes from the management of male characters. Following the *rosa* tradition, Bertola's heroes are still temperamental, have striking features and are well upward on the professional ladder, but these stock characteristics are always cleverly rewritten. A case in point is Filippo Corelli of *Aspirapolvere di stelle*, a bestselling writer whose striking features and passionate prose make him particularly successful among female readers:

> Era una specie di Brad Pitt padano, profumato e vitale come un albero di arance. Era alto, forte, sorridente, era tutto dorato e appassionato, metteva felicità a vederlo, e tanto più seducente e misterioso appariva il contrasto con le sue occasionali malinconie [. . .] Era più luminoso, più caldo e più profumato degli altri uomini. E che profumo . . . Cos'era? Non lo aveva mai sentito . . . E quel colore di capelli? Che biondo era? Non lo aveva mai visto. Anche l'azzurro degli occhi era di una sfumatura sconosciuta. Non proprio blu. Turchese. Non proprio celesti. Blu? Non troppo azzurri. Verdi?
>
> He was like a Brad Pitt from the Po Valley, fragrant and vigorous like an orange tree. He was tall, strong, smiling, everything in him was golden and passionate, just looking at him would make you happy, so that the contrast with his occasional melancholy seemed all the more alluring and mysterious [. . .] He was brighter, warmer and more fragrant than other men. And that scent . . . What was it? She had never smelled it . . . And that hair color? What shade of blond was it? She had never seen it. Even the blue in his eyes was an unknown shade. Not quite blue. Turquoise. Not really celeste. Blue? Not too light-blue. Green? (62-65)

Together with the reference to movie star Brad Pitt, displaced in the rural landscape of Italy's Po river valley, Corelli's features come across not so much as rapturous but rather as comically exaggerated in the meticulous yet unsuccessful attempt at capturing the exact shade of his eyes. Here Bertola is playing on the redundant descriptions of stunning and sensitive male heroes in popular romance, which readers would perhaps overlook if the writer had not previously cast Corelli as a narcissistic sexual predator, who relentlessly uses his good looks to seduce women. Because the main plot is based on the fact that all the female characters in the novel are unaware of Corelli's true nature and easily fall under his charming spell, the audience is put in the position of truly enjoying the comic effect at work.

Bertola's use of the comic also recreates the "transformation and fantasy" proposed by Deleyto as a key feature of the romantic comedy genre, as humour often helps the characters (and the audience) in understanding and negotiating intimate matters. In *Aspirapolvere di stelle*, for example, Gabriele confesses his love to Ginevra with a dramatic "because I love you" in the middle of a quarrel. But as the excerpt below shows, Bertola immediately puts under comical scrutiny this fundamental trope of popular romance:

> "Mi può venire in mente" le spiegò con pazienza Gabriele, "perché ti amo." Si bloccò, sconvolto lui stesso da quello che aveva appena detto. Mai e poi mai, in tanti anni di dedizione alla femmina, aveva pronunciato quella formula spaventosa. Aveva detto di tutto, dal desolante "Lo sai che a te ci tengo" all'ingannevole ardente "Ti adoro" [. . .] Per fortuna, la stasi temporale passò inosservata perché si era bloccata anche Ginevra, a cui nessuno aveva più detto "ti amo" dai tempi di un remoto fidanzato giovanile. [. . .] Ma un "ti amo" così, a dieci centimetri, con quegli occhi fiammeggianti, be', era qualcosa.

> "I can come up with it" Gabriele explained patiently, "because I love you." He stopped, shocked by what he had just said. Never, ever, in many years of dedication to women, had he pronounced those frightening words. He had said everything and anything, from the bleak "You know I care for you" to the deceitfully passionate "I adore you" [. . .] Fortunately, the temporary standstill went unnoticed because Ginevra was shocked too, as no one had said to her "I love you" since the days of a remote high-school boyfriend. [. . .] But an "I love you" like that, ten inches away, with those burning eyes, well, that was something. (86)

The declaration of love is one of the eight essential elements of the romance outlined by Pamela Regis (34) and Bertola's reassessment of the hero's momentous "I love you" equally dismisses and holds up the codes and language of romance fiction. The impenitent bachelor Gabriele cannot believe that he has just uttered "those frightening words," which he has always avoided and paraphrased with less compromising ones, and realises that his attitude toward commitment may have changed just because he has been able to say them. Ginevra, who on her part is aware of Gabriele's feelings but is not ready to reciprocate them yet, is forced to admit to herself that such passionate words are indeed "something." This way, the writer has reaffirmed the pivotal role of the declaration in romance narratives, but the comedic tone has displaced its usual frame of reference, to the advantage not only of the plot and its development, but also of the audience, who is engaged in a richer, more playful reading experience.

A further example comes from *Biscotti e sospetti*, where after a very long courtship Mattia finally spends the night with Violetta. The morning after, the two have the following conversation over breakfast:

> "Non vuoi sapere quando torno? Quando ci rivedremo? Che ne sarà di noi? Se abbiamo solo passato la notte insieme o se c'è di più?"Lei ridacchiò. "E tu? Vuoi saperlo?"
>
> Mattia le andò vicino e la baciò molto.
>
> "Io lo so."
>
> "Okay, allora prima o poi confronteremo le nostre informazioni."

> "Don't you want to know when I get back? When we'll meet again? What will become of us? If we have just spent the night together or there's more?"
>
> She giggled. "And you? Do you want to know it?"
>
> Mattia went over and kissed her a lot.
>
> "I already know it."
>
> "Okay, then sooner or later we will compare our data." (227)

The dialogue humorously mocks the load of emotional expectations after a sexual encounter, with Mattia taken aback by Violetta's lack of concern about their relationship, and it does a very good job in delivering a happy ending that is both predictable and unconventional: on the one hand, the characters carefully avoid the declaration of love that would celebrate them as a couple; on the other hand, Mattia's bold kiss and Violetta's laid-back response leave no doubt about their blissful future, giving the scene a romantic closure that is understated and emotionally satisfying all the same.

The characters' jobs are another area where Bertola engages with both chick lit and *romanzo rosa* features in a comedic way. In *Biscotti e sospetti*, for example, Caterina proudly embraces her family's working-class tradition of seamstress but with a twist, as she specialises in quality clothes for blow-up sex dolls: "Io faccio vestiti per le bambole gonfiabili. [. . .] Sarta, non stilista. Sono una sarta come mia madre e la mia prozia, però in un altro ramo. Loro fanno vestiti per le signore vere" ("I make clothes for blow-up sex dolls. [. . .] Seamstress, not designer. I am a seamstress like my mother and my aunt, but in another branch. They make clothes for real women"; 17) The humble profession of seamstress, reclaimed by Caterina as opposed to the modern and more glamorous designer, frames her within the traditional feminine domestic sphere as her mother and aunt before her. At the same time, those class-inherited skills are now updated and transferred to a different field, one that could not be more edgy and sexually charged. As a result, Caterina ironically embodies dispositions that are antithetical to one another: chick lit's middle-class, smart and sexually savvy professional, and the working-class, humble and chaste labourer of the traditional popular romance. Likewise, in *Aspirapolvere di stelle* the three protagonists Penelope, Ginevra and Arianna run a cleaning and catering company called "Fate Veloci" (Speedy Fairies). Each of them specialises in a domestic task (cleaning, gardening and cooking, respectively) and their services are in high demand among Turin's upper-class families. When they are hired by a critically acclaimed writer (Filippo Corelli) to perform domestic duties in his villa, the brief they receive describes the tasks in detail:

> Quello che Filippo Corelli voleva dalle Fate Veloci era una perfetta e totale gestione di ogni faccenda domestica, dalle pulizie alla cura del giardino. Voleva cibi perfetti ma solo quando li avesse richiesti, voleva mobili lucidi e profumati, voleva un terrazzo accogliente anche nel cuore dell'inverno, voleva legna per il camino sempre ben impilata nelle ceste, voleva lenzuola profumate, camicie stirate, bagni schiuma che non finissero mai, dentifrici sempre nuovi, frigorifero sempre pieno ma sempre pieno di sorprese. E non voleva, invece, nessuno che gli parlasse, gli chiedesse, gli stesse fra i piedi, passasse davanti allo studio in cui lavorava.
>
> What Filippo Corelli wanted from the Speedy Fairies was the perfect and total management of all household chores, from cleaning to gardening. He wanted the perfect food, but only when he requested it, he wanted shining and fragrant furniture, he also wanted a cozy balcony in the middle of winter, he wanted firewood always well stacked in baskets, he wanted scented linen, ironed shirts, endless bubble baths, always new toothpaste, a refrigerator always full but always full of surprises. He didn't want, however, anybody

> speaking to him, asking him questions, bothering him, wandering in front of the studio where he was working. (23)

As we can see, the "the perfect and total management of all household chores" is intended literally and encompasses a list of impossibly exaggerated duties that, indeed, could be successfully carried out by magical creatures only. The image of the "domestic goddess" portrayed in popular media culture is upgraded to a better and more efficient domestic fairy, who does her magic and quickly disappears.[9] By stretching this fantasy to its limits, Bertola plays on the supposedly natural competence of women in relation to domestic duties and intensifies the gendered nature of such a fantasy in a way that is less denigrating than ironic, emphasised by Corelli's childish repetition of "he wanted".

Finally, the following excerpt from *A neve ferma* offers a good example of how Bertola recasts chick lit's obsession with beauty and appearance:

> Ginevra aveva compiuto trentadue anni in ottobre, e quindi avrebbe dovuto combattere [le rughe] già da sette anni. Invece aveva appena cominciato. Si era data alle creme la settimana prima, e adesso cercava di recuperare con lo zelo. Dopo la crema idratante, considerò con attenzione gli altri barattolini allineati sulla mensola del suo bagno tutto rosa. Meglio l'emolliente con la calendula, carota e ginseng, o quello al ginko biloba e alla vite rossa? E buttarsi decisamente sulla crema tonificante all'olio di jojoba e al burro di karité? Si guardò ben bene allo specchio. Non vedeva la minima traccia di rughe di nessun genere. Cedimento dei tessuti? Assente. Con un sospiro di sollievo, scelse la crema alla vite rossa, che meglio si accordava alla stagione.
>
> Ginevra had turned thirty-two in October, and should have started to fight [expression wrinkles] seven years ago. Instead, she had just begun. She got seriously into creams the week before, and now was trying to catch up. After the moisturizer, she carefully considered the other jars lined up on the shelf of her all-pink bathroom. Better the emollient with calendula, carrot and ginseng, or the one with ginkgo and red vine leaves? And how about going decidedly for the jojoba oil and shea butter tonifying cream? She took a very good look in the mirror. She couldn't see a trace of wrinkles of any kind. Sagging skin? Nope. With a sigh of relief, she chose the cream with red vine leaves, in tone with the season. (5)

As Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff have noted, in chick lit narratives "the body is constructed in a highly specific way: it is a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodelling in order to conform to judgments of normative femininity" (498). In the quoted paragraph, Ginevra, at the age of thirty-two, feels that she should engage with a plethora of skincare products in order to avoid wrinkles and premature skin ageing. In evoking the surveillance of the female body that so often recurs in chick lit, Bertola plays on discourses of normative femininity presented in women's magazines and adverts, whose language she mocks in the detailed description of exotic and mysterious ingredients that promise miraculous effects. Moreover, the passing nod to Ginevra's all-pink bathroom adds a visual detail that frames

the scene in an utterly feminine space. The writer then works by subtraction, formally and stylistically: on the one hand, the passage stresses the contrast between Ginevra's commitment to catch up with time and discipline her body—she is *seriously* into skincare now—and her overwhelming inability to choose the appropriate product among the many she has bought. On the other hand, the narrative structure builds a tension that is eventually released in a comic anticlimax where Ginevra, upon realising that her skin is still quite flawless, chooses a cream that complements the autumn season.

As we have seen, Bertola's relationship with *rosa* and chick lit narratives is not just a passive update of formulaic conventions in light of contemporary literary trends; rather, it actively re-contextualises generic rules and conventions through comedy and humour. From this perspective, Bertola's dynamic engagement with chick lit and romance narratives is most evident in the intertextual and metafictional subtext of her novels, inasmuch as it sets up a transformative dialogue between the old texts, the new ones and their readership, as I shall discuss in the final part of this article.

Intertextuality and metafiction in Bertola's novels

As many critics have noted, intertextuality and metafiction are at the core of chick lit, a genre that Claire Squires aptly describes as a "genre-crossing fiction [. . .] placed between the 'mass' and the 'literary' market, by appealing to and playing on the conventions of romance fiction" (160). Suzanne Ferris, for example, has discussed Fielding's overt borrowing of and homage to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (72), while Stephanie Harzewski has investigated the influence and presence of Edith Wharton's fiction on Bushnell's writing (108-14).

Bertola addresses mass-market popular romance and its place in Italy's literary scene in *Ne parliamo a cena* and *Aspirapolvere di stelle*, with different yet related purposes and outcomes. In the first case, Veronica is an upper-class, stay-at-home mother who lands a well-paid contract with Harmony, and her family's reaction is self-explanatory: "Scrivi Harmony? *Gli* Harmony?" ("You write Harmony? *The* Harmony?"; 214). The italicised definite article exposes the notorious fame that accompanies the publisher in Italy's literary landscape, where over the years the word "Harmony" has become shorthand for cheap writing and inappropriate readings, regardless of the genre they belong to, and effectively conveys a sense of disbelief that is implicitly judgmental. Bertola, however, immediately reframes such conversation when Veronica impatiently dismisses her family's biased notions and comments that being an accomplished writer in a highly specialised and thriving genre where competition is fierce will give her independence, both in the personal and the professional sphere. In the case of *Aspirapolvere di stelle*, by contrast, Bertola uses the complicit relationship that her characters entertain with mass-market romance to address and re-contextualise chick lit tropes:

> Sono fantastica, pensava. Nessuna di queste slavate schiave del dovere potrebbe immaginare che nel mio cuore di perfetta e amorevole madre brucia un vulcano di passione (in effetti, Arianna aveva ricominciato a leggere gli Harmony). Sono una vera donna moderna, che concentra in sé la

> madre, la femmina, la compagna, l'imprenditrice . . . proprio come in un articolo di "Marie Claire"!
>
> I'm amazing, she thought. None of these washed-out wage-slaves could ever imagine that in my heart of perfect and loving mother burns a volcano of passion (in fact, Arianna had started reading Harmony novels again). I am a truly modern woman, mother, feminine, partner, and entrepreneur all at once . . . Just like in a "Marie Claire" article! (78)

Arianna's final line brings to mind the ambiguous relationship that chick lit characters entertain with glossy women's magazines and the unachievable models of femininity they present, along the lines of Bridget Jones's famous claim of being a "child of *Cosmopolitan* culture [. . .] traumatised by supermodels and too many quizzes" (59), yet it is the phrase in brackets that offers the chance to discuss Bertola's interest in the forms and conventions of chick lit and popular romance. A few paragraphs earlier, Arianna said that she was not interested in Harmony romances; however, since the way in which she talks is indeed modelled on romance stock phrases (such as "in my heart [. . .] burns a volcano of passion"), the narrator intervenes to point out that Arianna is in fact reading such novels. Once again, Bertola introduces Harmony novels to play on the stereotype of the unsophisticated woman duped by these readings, but this time around her narrative strategy invokes a more active involvement of the audience. Indeed, the shift in the mode of address (where the writer uses a free indirect discourse that combines third person narrator, first person narrator, and external omniscient narrator) emphasises the stereotype but simultaneously tweaks it in a way that, as Rose reminds us, becomes a parodic "refunctioning" of it (158).

More examples of "genre-crossing" appear in *A neve ferma*, a novel where metafiction and intertextuality are performed through a direct and explicit engagement with the Italian tradition of *romanzo rosa*. One of the main characters is an aristocratic lawyer who secretly reads love stories and dreams of a love-life modelled on their characters, as the following excerpts shows:

> Mario Mongilardi leggeva romanzi d'amore. Questa sua segreta attività era iniziata quando aveva nove anni, e passava le vacanze con sua cugina Ada, tre anni più grande, accanita lettrice dei Romanzi della Rosa Salani, che aveva trovato a mucchi nella soffitta di casa. … Mario aveva cominciato a spararsi *Prima o Poi*, *Oltre gli Scogli*, *Sei giorni* e altri significativi titoli. Poi, ormai assuefatto, era passato a più nobili autrici, e aveva letto tutta Jane Austen, le più significative fra le Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell e via via, fino a Margaret Mitchell e Rosamund Pilcher. Naturalmente erano letture segrete, portate avanti con somma discrezione. … Sul suo comodino sbandierava Clive Cussler, Stephen King e, quando voleva darsi un tono più intellettuale, Niccolò Ammaniti, ma nel cassetto chiuso a chiave c'era sempre un romantico romanzo femminile. Quindi lui sapeva. Sapeva da sempre, si può dire, quale fosse il suo destino.
>
> Mario Mongilardi read romance novels. This secret activity had begun when

> he was nine years old and was on holiday with his cousin Ada, three years older, serial reader of the *Romanzi della Rosa* Salani. [. . .] Mario had started to feed himself on *Prima o Poi*, *Oltre gli Scogli*, *Sei giorni* and other meaningful titles. Later, by then addicted, he had moved on to the noblest authors, and had read all of Jane Austen, the most significant among the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and so on, up to Margaret Mitchell and Rosamund Pilcher. Of course these were clandestine readings, carried out with utmost discretion. [. . .] On his bedside table there were Clive Cussler, Stephen King and, when he wanted to appear a bit more cultured, Niccolò Ammaniti, but in a locked drawer he always kept a woman's romantic novel. Therefore he knew. He had always known, one might say, what his fate was. (94)

The educated, professional male passionate about romance but ashamed to admit his guilty pleasure is not an original creation, but Bertola positions this narrative device in an intertextual framework that refers to a very specific literary tradition. Alongside with critically sanctioned female authors such as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and mainstream romance writer Rosamund Pilcher, the narrator of *A neve ferma* mentions the Salani's imprint "Romanzi della Rosa" as part of Mario's book collection, quoting actual titles to back up the character's extensive knowledge of the genre.[10] By doing so, Bertola goes to the roots of the Italian tradition and, instead of making up romance titles by exaggerating their flamboyant style, she takes advantage of existing novels and links them to the works of critically sanctioned women writers. The metafictional and intertextual elements are even more subtle when we note that Salani, the publisher of Mario's "meaningful" novels, is also Bertola's publisher, thus inscribing *A neve ferma* itself in the very same tradition. As a result, while it is up to the reader's awareness to notice and fully appreciate all the references at work in the quoted passage, the "Romanzi della Rosa" series is deployed as the bait that would lure Mario into the underbelly world of women's romantic fiction. The dangers of such gendered and clandestine activities are then reinforced by the language and phrasing, which on the one hand cleverly imitate the lexicon of drug addiction, and on the other hand hyperbolically frame the novels as womanly readings. A few sentences later, the comic element is reinforced by the nod to manly popular writers such as Clive Cussler and Stephen King, but particularly to the critically acclaimed Italian pulp author Niccolò Ammaniti, whose books Mario puts on display in order to show a less feminine, more gender-appropriate taste.

Moreover, Mario is depicted as an avid reader unable to separate fiction from reality who constantly uses *romanzi rosa* to decipher people and situations, a narrative technique that is consistent with Rose's aforementioned observations on parody as metafiction in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. According to Rose, parody is a transformative process which "mirrors the process of composing and receiving literary texts" (59), which we see clearly at work when we learn that Mario, duped by these readings, has been waiting for his true soulmate to come along, and when he meets his childhood friend Emma he convinces himself that she is the one:

> Inevitabile, inaspettata, un giorno avrebbe incontrato LEI [. . .] la donna del destino, la magica fanciulla che avrebbe spazzato via tutte le altre, trasformandolo in un marito fedele e appassionato, proprio come i vari Conte

> Hubert e ingegner John e Darcy e Rochester dei suoi libri preferiti. E adesso, da vari indizi, aveva identificato questa nemesi dei sentimenti in Emma. Proprio come in una storia dei Delly, era una ragazza del paese, di bell'aspetto, colta, gentile, elevata, figlia di semplici ma oneste persone. [. . .] Una sola cosa lo disturbava. Doveva esserci, da qualche parte, un ostacolo. C'era sempre, nei romanzi.
>
> Unavoidable, unexpected, one day he would meet HER [. . .] the woman of his destiny, the magical young lady who would sweep away all the others, turning him into a faithful and passionate husband, just like Count Hubert and Darcy and Rochester from his beloved books. And now, from various clues, he had identified this nemesis of the feelings in Emma. Just like in a Delly story, she was a girl from his hometown, handsome, intelligent, gentle, refined, the daughter of simple but honest people. [. . .] Only one thing bothered him. There must have been, somewhere, an obstacle. There was always one, in the novels. (94-95)

The above passage reveals Mario's function in the narrative as a self-reflexive, metafictional approach to romance fiction: just like in a story written by the French siblings Delly, best-selling authors of early 20th century romance across Europe, Emma displays all the traits of the conventional romance heroine, as she is of humble origins, beautiful and tender. At this point, to conform to the romance narrative structure and match the courtship plot that Mario has in mind, their relationship must encounter an obstacle that would make their final union all the more meaningful. Here Bertola applies the parody to the romance trope of the "barrier" between the heroine and hero analysed by Regis, who defines it as the element that "drives the romance novel" (32). It could be external, such as a physical separation or rules imposed by society, but also internal, and in this case it will refer to the motivations, feelings and personality of the hero and heroine. Furthermore, Regis points out that "through [the barrier] element the writer can examine any situation within the heroine's mind or in the world itself" (32), and Bertola makes the most of such an opportunity to further characterise Mario. In fact, when he learns that Emma is still in love with the man who has just dumped her, his reaction is one of relief: "Mario respirò sollevato. Tutto andava per il meglio" ("Mario sighed in relief. Everything was fine"; 105). Later on, when he tells his cousin and fellow romance reader Ada that he has finally found the woman of his destiny, he triumphally adds: "È perfetta Ada. C'è anche l'ostacolo ("She is perfect, Ada. There's even the barrier"; 125). To make the situation all the more comic, shortly afterwards Mario falls in love with Emma's friend Camelia, but once again, blinded by his beloved stories, he understands this event as an additional barrier in his relationship with Emma, stubbornly reading his situation in terms of the many love triangles he has seen in old romances.

The intertextual framing and Bertola's use of parody become more evident when we look at specific tropes of the genre and how they are recast. In his study on the language of humour, Walter Nash argues that "a test of good parody is not how closely it imitates or reproduces certain turns of phrase, but how well it *generates* a style convincingly like that of the parodied author" (84). The focus here is on the writer's "creative allusiveness," which directs the audience toward either a specific author or text or, more generally, on

"pseudoparody," which Nash defines as the technique that evokes "a hazy recollection of rhetorical procedures" that readers would immediately recognise as familiar (100). Bertola's "creative allusiveness" is well on display in the next passage, where the fierce and temperamental male protagonist is put under scrutiny. Mario is on his first date with Emma but does not know how to behave, so once again he resorts to his fictional role-models:

> Darcy, l'aviatore John o il Conte Hubert, di fronte a una frase così avrebbero inchiodato la Donna Del Destino al più vicino faggio, sussurrandole incoerenti parole d'amore. Mario si sentiva un po' pigro, quella sera, ma comunque baciò Emma.
>
> Presented with a sentence like that, Darcy, John the aviator or Count Hubert would pin the Woman Of Destiny to the closest beech tree, whispering incoherent words of love to her. Mario was feeling a little lazy, that evening, but he kissed Emma anyway. (105)

Here Mario finds himself in a very tricky place: he acknowledges that the situation would require him to act boldly and audaciously, because this is what romantic heroes like Darcy or Rochester would do, but at the same time he is feeling a bit lazy, and eventually the dramatic and romantic gesture turns out to be an ordinary kiss. The effect is an anticlimax highlighted by the use of the adversative "but," which pinpoints the split between the two worlds that Mario inhabits and brilliantly conveys his feeble attempt at living up to his fictional standards.

Likewise, the trope of the barrier is played throughout the narrative as Camelia and Mario, clearly in love with each other and sharing the same romance-mediated fantasies, withhold their passion in the name of the barrier—that is, Emma—until the end of the novel, when the obstacle is removed and the pairing successfully settled. Here Bertola's parody takes a step further, as the removal of the obstacle comes in the form of a friendly (and anticlimactic) agreement between the two women, which leaves Mario quite baffled:

> "Ma io non voglio sposare Camelia. Voglio sposare te."
>
> "Strano. Sei pazzo di lei."
>
> "Sì, be', è solo una cosa . . . cioè, perché tu ami quell'altro, e allora io . . . si tratta di superare gli ostacoli, in modo che il nostro amore possa . . . be'. . . diciamo trionfare."
>
> "But I don't want to marry Camelia. I want to marry you."
>
> "That's odd. You're crazy for her."
>
> "Yeah, well, it's just . . . I mean, because you love that other guy, and then I . . . it all boils down to overcoming obstacles, so that our love can . . . well, triumph, so to speak." (222)

Mario's hilarious struggle to make sense of such an infringement of the genre's main trope, in which the long-suffering lovers eventually triumph over the adversities, is all the more significant because he does not realise that he has been part of it all along, just in a different role and from a different perspective—one that readers, by contrast, have been able to anticipate and enjoy throughout the narrative.

Conclusions

Bertola's novels occupy and innovative place in Italian romantic fiction. Rather than approaching Anglo-American chick lit and the Italian tradition of *romanzo rosa* as formally distinct genres, Bertola opts for a smooth interplay between the two. The result is an artful intergeneric dialogue in which these traditions are put in relation to one another in terms of themes, narrative structures and stylistic features: from chick lit's comedic and tongue-in-cheek tone, to the intertextual references within the romance canon, to the multilayered and metafictional structure of the plot, as in the case of *A neve ferma*. More specifically, Bertola's most important contribution to the genre is her use of comedy and intertextual parody, a strategy that is best read in relation to Deleyto's transformative power of the comic space in romantic comedies. The comic space outlined by Deleyto is one that allows the interaction of several generic, cultural and social signifiers, which in turn loosens (and simultaneously enriches) the fixed set of features that the genre deploys. Similarly, in the landscape of Italy's romantic fiction, Bertola's comedic and intertextual approach to *rosa* and chick lit staples sets up an equally flexible framework that, running through all her work, plays on the social, cultural and literary background of both genres. The result is a new romantic narrative that is not derivative, but thought-provoking and creative in its own right.

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian in this article are mine. Bertola has also written a comic self-help manual on how to cope with a sentimental break-up, and in 2010 published a collection of short stories. She is a literary translator and an accomplished screenplay writer involved in the production of successful TV series for many Italian networks, for example the sit-com *I Cesaroni* (2006-ongoing) and the historical romance *Elisa di Rivombrosa* (2003-2005). The latter has been exported to Spain, Germany, France, Canada, Belgium Poland and Russia among other countries.

[2] Under the pseudonym Delly, brother and sister Frédéric (1876-1949) and Marie (1875-1947) Petitjean de la Rosière wrote more than 100 books. Ghiazza argues that their production is the epitome of the conservative ideology and educational purposes of the genre (153-55).

[3] For the history and development of *romanzo rosa*, see Arslan and Pozzato; Banti; Ghiazza; Pozzato; Roccella; Spinazzola (1977; 1985; 1995).

[4] See Pozzato; Rosa; Roccella (51-74). Also, it is worth noting that in 1963, Italian *Neoavanguardia* (or "Gruppo 63") belittled critically acclaimed novelists such as Giorgio Bassani (1916-2000) as the "Liala" of Italian literature because of their conventional use of

language and narrative structure, which the avant-garde movement rejected in favour of experimental writing and political engagement.

[5] According to Harmony's website, the latest sales figures account for 5 million copies sold each year (400 million in thirty years), with around 50 titles released monthly (Harlequin Mondadori). On serial romance, see also Rak (81-88).

[6] The term "chick lit" first appeared in 1995, as the title for the anthology of women's short stories *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, co-edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell. The collection promoted a new kind of fiction rooted in feminist women's writing that was also an ironic and thought-provoking commentary on issues concerning young women (Mazza 18).

[7] RDI's publications ended in 2009; the guidelines have since then been withdrawn from Harlequin website. See also Craddock.

[8] The article also explains the marketing strategies adopted by Harlequin Mondadori to launch the new imprint, such as merchandising tie-ins like moisturisers, instant coffee and jewellery brands.

[9] On the figure of the "domestic goddess" in popular culture, see Hollows.

[10] All the cited novels were written by British novelist Elynor Glyn and published by Salani between 1925 and 1934, obviously in translation.

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