Beatrice Palmieri, "Entry on: Atalanta. A Maiden in Greece of Gods and Heroes [Atalanta. Una fanciulla nella Grecia degli dei e degli eroi] by Emanuele Luzzati , Gianni Rodari ", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1027. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Emanuele Luzzati , Gianni Rodari

Atalanta. A Maiden in Greece of Gods and Heroes [Atalanta. Una fanciulla nella Grecia degli dei e degli eroi]

Italy (1982)

TAGS: Argonauts Atalanta Calydonian Boar Diana Golden Fleece Hercules Jason Medea





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General information	
Title of the work	Atalanta. A Maiden in Greece of Gods and Heroes [Atalanta. Una fanciulla nella Grecia degli dei e degli eroi]
Country of the First Edition	Italy
Country/countries of popularity	Italy
Original Language	Italian
First Edition Date	1982
First Edition Details	Gianni Rodari, *Atalanta. Una fanciulla nella Grecia degli dei e degli eroi,* disegni di Emanuele Luzzati. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1982, 90 pp.
ISBN	883592426X
Genre	Mythological fiction, Novels, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (8+)
Author of the Entry	Beatrice Palmieri, University of Bologna, beatrice.palmieri@studio.unibo.it
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Creators



Emanuele Luzzati , 1921 - 2007
(Illustrator)

Emanuele Luzzati (1921-2007) was born in Genova. After graduating from the École des Beaux Arts in Lausanne (Switzerland), he dedicated his career to various fields of applied arts, ranging from painting to ceramics, from illustration to film sets and animation. He was nominated twice for an Oscar in the category of best animated short film. He is known above all for illustration and scenography; indeed, he realized more than 400 set designs all over the world, but his mastery in all fields is demonstrated by countless prizes he was awarded in his life.

Sources:

it.wikipedia.org (accessed April 15, 2020);

galleriailvicolo.it (accessed April 15, 2020).

Bio prepared by Beatrice Palmieri, University of Bologna, beatrice.palmieri@studio.unibo.it



Gianni Rodari , 1920 - 1980
(Author)

Gianni Rodari was born in Omegna, a town located on the lake Orta, in Piedmont. He started his career working as a teacher and then, after the outbreak of World War II, he began to write for various newspapers. In 1950 he founded his own children's periodical,

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Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: January 10, 2022).

Pioniere (The Pioneer), and a few years later he started collaborating with RAI as author of a children's TV show, *Giocagiò*. His entire career is studded with masterpieces for children, familiar to many generations – not only in Italy. The key to his success is the belief in the liberating power of fantasy. He was awarded the Andersen prize, which ranks as Nobel for children's literature, in 1970.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: April 15, 2020);

it.wikipedia.org (accessed: April 15, 2020).

Bio prepared by Beatrice Palmieri, University of Bologna, beatrice.palmieri@studio.unibo.it

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Additional information

Translation

Catalan: *Atalanta: una jovencella a la Grecia dels deus i dels herois*, trans. Gabriel Janer Manila; ill. Frederic Anguera, Barcelona: La Galera, 1983.

Spanish: *Atalanta: una muchacha en la Grecia de los dioses y los heroes*, trans. Carmen Vázquez-Vigo, ill. Frederic Anguera, Barcelona: La Galera, 1983. Last ed. 2008.

Modern Greek: *Ατα*λάντη [Atalántī], trans. Lena Theodōridou-Pediōtidou, ed. Maria D. Tsaousī, ill. Emanuele Luzzati, Athens: Gutenberg, ©1988.

Summary

Atalanta. A Maiden in Greece of Gods and Heroes is an illustrated children's novel in which Gianni Rodari recounts the myth of Atalanta by combining a respectful reading of the tradition with a rewriting imbued with his characteristic fervent imagination. The protagonist of this story is Atalanta, daughter of King Iasus of Arcadia, who is repudiated at birth and abandoned on a mountain by order of her father who desired a male heir to the throne. Little Atalanta is saved and suckled by a she-bear and is brought up under Diana's watchful gaze: she grows up in contact with nature, observing the sky and learning to read the language of nature. After entering the sylvan court of Diana, she becomes a capable hunter like her female companions with whom she lives wildly in the woods, away from any contact with human settlements. Sometimes she finds herself spying on them from a distance, but she never feels the desire to go and live among men in houses that seem to her as a prison; especially after finding out that one of these men killed Britomarti, her companion and friend. The only desire she has now is to avenge her friend's death: she wants to humiliate men and decides to do it by taking part in the Calydonian boar hunt.

Thus comes the time for Atalanta to confront the world of men: she travels to King Oeneus' court and there she is welcomed as the only woman among the hunters, favoured by the young prince, Meleager, who shows a certain attraction towards this mysterious stranger. Without too much effort, Atalanta excels, and not only manages to

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complete her revenge plan, but also experiences love for the first time: she falls in love with Meleager. His mother prefers to see him dead rather than in the arms of a woman like Atalanta. The story is combined here with the myth of the Argonauts, which allows the plot to unfold in other adventures for the heroine: she travels alongside Jason and Hercules in search of the Golden Fleece and arrives at the royal court in Colchis. Here she witnesses the exploits of Jason obligated to conquer the golden fleece, and gets acquainted with Medea, who asks her to help her deceive her father in order to save the hero she is in love with. Atalanta refuses to be complicit in the deception: “I will learn everything there is to be learned, but not deception.”* At the same time, a news from the world in which she grew up causes a burning disappointment: Diana punished two companions, Callisto and Titana, transforming them into a bear and a deer respectively. Comparing this ruthlessness to the generosity of Hercules, who frees Prometheus from the suffering he was condemned to, Atalanta makes a decision that will change her life forever: she will never return to the woods, choosing to remain among men.

The last chapter of the adventures of Atalanta starts with a meeting with her father: she does not hold a grudge against him and decides to stay by his side to assist him in his old age. She also decides to comply with his last request, namely, to marry, but on her own terms: only someone who can beat her in a race will be able to receive her hand in marriage. After several failed attempts, her father sees his dream fade as Atalanta proves unbeatable, until Melanion arrives. The heroine challenges the young man with the same spirit as always: she runs to win, but in the end, love wins.

* Gianni Rodari, *Atalanta*, ill. Emanuele Luzzati, San Dorligo della Valle: Einaudi Ragazzi, 2010, trans. by the Author of the entry.

Analysis

Within Rodari’s vast work, *Atalanta* stands out as the only opportunity to engage the wonderful world of Greek mythology. Here the epic story of the heroine is intertwined with an intimate story of a girl with whom any reader could identify, and for this reason able of leaving an indelible mark on the common imagination. The myth of Atalanta is

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reworked by Rodari in order to create a coming-of-age story in line with his most dear ideals. These ideals can be expressed in one word “democracy”, which in those years (1970s – 1980s) was significantly gaining importance, also in the world of school – where social differences were deeply pronounced. Rodari was a strong proponent of this renewal. As he stated, “the sense of utopia will one day be recognized as one of the human senses on par with sight, hearing, smell etc. In anticipation of that day, it is up to fairy tales to keep it alive, and to use it to scrutinize the fantastic universe.”* His utopia can in all probability be ascribed to the name of the heroine whom he has chosen for protagonist of the only book set in the time of myths, timeless par excellence, and hence always present. Atalanta, indeed, derives from the Greek word *atalantos* meaning “equal in weight”, which may certainly refer to her ability to excel in various contests with men, but it may also be interpreted as a dream of radical change in adult society and even in school. Rodari tries to give life to this utopia of democracy in a text where fantasy becomes a magic wand used by the author-demiurge. The procedure that the author follows consists in reworking the raw material of the myth – often deciding not to follow the known chronological order of events, or to omit problematic parts, such as Atalanta’s rape – staging various episodes one after the other, each characterized by the presence of a character who helps shaping Atalanta’s identity. In essence, the author combines various characters of the myth, lighting each one with meaning and showing how they create, episode after episode, tile after tile, the essence of the heroine.

The first significant episode coincides with the beginning of the story of Atalanta: abandonment. Atalanta overcomes this first phase of her life and grows up free and curious in the awareness of her autonomy, she survives relying on her senses and the nature that surrounds her. The main character in this first phase is Diana, goddess of wild nature and children; the conversation she has with Atalanta before the girl leaves for Calydon is significant:

Diana: “You don't know men, they are capable of being evil sometimes. You were born among them, even if they repudiated you. It is right that you measure yourself with them. Go, I'll set you free.”

Atalanta: “Free? But I will come back to you, this is where I want to live.”

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Diana: “Will you come back? I do not know. You will decide. I set you free. You can come back or stay. If you find that there are better things than hunting and more beautiful than the woods you grew up in, follow them.”

Atalanta: “I'll be back.”**

Atalanta leaves only to take revenge against men, convinced that she would return to a natural life that is her own: she does not know that she sets out on a journey of discovery of the world of men, a metaphor for growth and progress towards maturity; and Rodari, who as a teacher and pedagogue, knows indeed something about growing up, places this transitory moment at the age of thirteen. Here the writer proves to be in line with a narrative tradition that conventionally presents the maturation in the form of a journey, a story of adventures that mark the years of his last childhood and early adolescence – Pinocchio is a striking example of this in the Italian tradition. For this purpose, the myth of Atalanta is naturally suitable, being Atalanta a heroine in movement since birth also in the original version of the myth.

Then comes the Calydonian boar hunt: Atalanta (precise age unknown) enters the world of men, the bastion of Minerva, goddess of wisdom and culture. Rodari entrusts to this moment of the myth a very important task: he wants to oppose the social and cultural beliefs according to which being a woman is a sign of inferiority, as is growing up in conditions different from the established norms. In fact, Atalanta is the living proof that the two factors, femininity and naturalness, are not a weakness, on the contrary, in this case, they become significant strengths: the fact of coming from the world of Diana gives Atalanta the practical means to be able to sustain such a grueling hunt, and the fact of being a woman makes her triumph even more memorable.

But the hunt becomes also an opportunity to get to know love: alongside Meleager, Atalanta forgets revenge and has a feeling of sympathy towards the young man, but she realizes too late that she is in love with him. According to the myth, Meleager leaves with the Argonauts after the boar hunt, but here Rodari intervenes with his fantastic magic wand and lets poor Meleager die, so that Atalanta can experience a moment of further growth: the pain of the death of a loved one.

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The stage lights are now moving to show the Argonauts who set off on their quest for the Golden Fleece: Theseus invites Atalanta to take Meleager's place, confirming that the heroine is Atalanta, "equal in weight", in name and in fact. During this adventure, Theseus will teach the protagonist that men know how to use cunning; Hercules will be the representative of kindness and friendship, showing his kind heart by freeing Prometheus from his suffering; the story of Jason and Medea instead will cause Atalanta to choose honesty over deception. Each of these elements helps shape the spirit of the girl who grows up respecting her most authentic feelings in a coherent way.

After numerous adventures, the time finally comes to make the choice: return to the woods, as she unhesitatingly promised Diana, or stay in the world of Minerva? The answer becomes clear after Atalanta learns of Diana's cruelty: the girl, who has matured in the meantime, has learned to distinguish and recognize the values that are truly hers, and these have nothing to do with the world of Diana, of her childhood, to which she now must say goodbye. A new adventure awaits Atalanta: that of taking care of her old father. Here Rodari faithfully follows the myth, adding a moral to this tale consistent with all his own narrative. The author imagines an encounter between Atalanta and the father who had abandoned her as a crowning moment of all her experiences: she does not resent her father, on the contrary she thinks that "had she grown up at court, safe among toys and fairy tales, she would now be an ordinary princess, able to cook and embroider. Instead she knows how to use the bow, and she had the chance to meet Meleager, Theseus, and Hercules: otherwise, what would she have known about men? Nothing."***

All the adventures she has gone through, although they went against the unquestioned traditions of a male-dominated and rigid society, perhaps allowed her to become the woman she wanted to be, authentic and without pretense. The driving force behind Rodari's writings is that of a revolutionary whose client, as he himself claimed, was the workers' movement. Rodari is an intellectual who wants to subvert an order dominated by a ruling class that presume to impart discipline, confusing education with judgment. As a teacher, Rodari sees in his colleagues children's antagonists, especially afraid of those coming from the turbulent sub-proletariat, who grew up on the street with social jungle methods. In this politicized context in which teachers, who had never known freedom (having lived fascism) were unable to teach it, Rodari distinguishes himself for his propensity to

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listen to that category which was so underestimated: that of children. He believes that a better world is possible starting from children: he does not trust in the imparting of a morality from top to bottom, but he has faith in children's ability to create their own values, trusting in their skills to build them and use them. The child is always at the center of Rodari's narrative, who, sharpening his "unripe ear", listens to what grown-ups never hear and speaks to children in clear language, close to them. In this way, young readers feel considered and understood, and not judged. Thus, put at ease and left free to imagine a world more suited to them, they can build their own identity by themselves.

Thus, even marriage, which she accepts to please her old father, becomes a symbolic issue. Atalanta sets her conditions: only somebody who beats her in a race will be allowed to marry her. An ominous mood defines this decision: at this moment, indeed, the conflict between the young adventurous girl she is and the woman she is becoming is over, the latter wins. The girl sets her conditions: the running race allows her to return for one last time in her mind to the times when, as a child, she ran free through the woods. After that, the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place. We are not told how old exactly she was at that time.

Luzzati's illustrations accompanying the narration allow the reader to identify with the world of myth which, thanks to the quality of the images, seems almost plausible: his style imitates that of children, two-dimensional, occasionally ramshackle but highly expressive. The color palette is lively and bright, and the narrated scenes are reproduced in the form of theatrical sets in which it is easy to visualize oneself. In this way, able to identify with the narrative, a contemporary viewer experiences the myth of Atalanta through these powerful and realistic images, as a democratic and just utopia, where all people, regardless of the expectations that traditional society places on them, manage to assert themselves in an authentic way, equal in weight.

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* Roghi, Vanessa, *Un mondo pieno di errori fantastici,* Il manifesto, ilmanifesto.it 22.10.2019 (accessed: April 16, 2020), trans. by the Author of the entry.

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	** Gianni Rodari, *Atalanta*, ill. Emanuele Luzzati, San Dorligo della Valle: Einaudi Ragazzi, 2010, trans. by the Author of the entry. *** Ibidem.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Argonauts Atalanta Calydonian Boar Diana Golden Fleece Hercules Jason Medea
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adventure Childhood Emotions Expectations Freedom Gaining understanding Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Identity Individuality Initiation Nature Society Transformation Values
Further Reading	Camarda, Marzia, *Una "savia bambina": Gianni Rodari e i modelli femminili*, Cagli (Pesaro e Urbino): Settenove edizioni, 2018.
Addenda	The entry is based on the edition: Gianni Rodari, *Atalanta*, ill. Emanuele Luzzati, San Dorligo della Valle: Einaudi Ragazzi, 2010, 93 pp.

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