

Lady Oscar's Transmedia Universe between Gender Representation and Seriality in the Digital Age⁴⁰

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Abstract

The narrative ecosystem spawned by the manga *Berusaïyu no Bara* (henceforth referred to by its English title *The Rose of Versailles*) (Riyoko Ikeda, 1972-1973) and its renowned protagonist, Lady Oscar, presents itself as a paradigmatic case study in the sphere of digital television seriality. It offers significant insights for the analysis of production and distribution, inter/transmedia dynamics, and the intercultural processes of fandom. This ecosystem stands out for its ability to permeate various media formats, thereby creating a rich transmedia universe. A prime example of its success is the 12-episode anime series, which first aired in Japan in 1979. This series delineates a path reflecting the metamorphosis of media consumption and practices in contemporary mediascape. Furthermore, *Lady Oscar* (the name given to the anime in France and Italy, where it achieved considerable success) (1979-1980, Nippon Television) assumes a pivotal role in discussions on gender representation in popular culture. The series challenges the tenets of heterosexual romanticism and traditional gender roles, with the protagonist serving as an icon of resistance against gender norms. She offers an alternative model of identity and relationships, resonating with contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. This analysis encompasses the intercultural and transnational processes, focusing on how *The Rose of Versailles* has captivated an international fandom, particularly in France and Italy. The series becomes a medium for exploring universal themes such as gender identity, social conflicts, and political dynamics, illustrating how a narrative can transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, influencing the perception and discussion of social issues in various contexts. *Lady Oscar* exemplifies how a television series can act as a crucial medium in narrating social and cultural transformations. Through its transmedia evolution, challenging gender roles, and intercultural resonance, the series provides a unique glimpse into the interaction between production, distribution, consumption, and participation in the contemporary media landscape.

Keyword: Anime; Manga, Gender Roles; Lady Oscar; Fandom.

⁴⁰ This article was conceived and edited jointly by the two authors. Nonetheless, it is possible to attribute Introduction and Conclusion to both authors, paragraphs 1-2-3 to Lorenzo Di Paola and paragraphs 4-5 to Manuela Di Franco.

Introduction

This article explores and analyzes the narrative ecosystem generated by the manga *The Rose of Versailles* to understand its impact on gender identity perception and the consumption of manga and comics, as well as anime and cartoons, in Italy and France. The adopted methodology includes a mediological and sociological analysis that takes into account the socio-cultural dynamics and the mediation processes characteristic of Japan in the 1970s, a key period for the transformation of the manga genre. In particular, it investigates how Riyoko Ikeda's work crossed media boundaries, expanding from manga to anime and beyond, and how it interacted with the Italian and French cultural context, influencing generations of readers and viewers.

The article addresses gender representations in the 1993 comics edition of *Lady Oscar*, and it reflects on the differences between the comic and the anime adaptation in Italy. It analyzes the results of a research questionnaire to explore the impact of *Lady Oscar* on the perception of gender identity and the consumption of manga and comics in Italy, with the intention of providing an empirical analysis that supports the theoretical investigation. Through this approach, the article aims to add fresh perspectives to the picture of the cultural and social influence of *Lady Oscar*, considering both the dynamics within Japan and those related to its reception and reinterpretation in Italy. By examining the narrative ecosystem of *Lady Oscar*, the article wants to approach Ikeda's work from a different angle, taking into consideration elements like nostalgia, inter-cultural exchange, and intermedial practices. In addition, a survey of the different register adopted by the Italian adaptation of *The Rose of Versailles* across different media — namely manga and anime — the article shows how translation practices and remediation processes are influenced by the target audience and the media.

1. The Japanese Revolution in Europe

Shōjo manga, in their historical and cultural evolution, represent a unique publishing phenomenon that, initially conceived for a specific demographic target (adolescent girls and young adult women), has transformed into a significant expressive space to explore, and redefine gender identities, social dynamics, and affective themes. This transformation took place in a rapidly changing media context, where manga interacted not only with their audience but also with other media and technologies.

Born at the beginning of the 20th century as editorial products aimed at adolescent girls, *shōjo manga* were initially characterized by narratives focused on passive heroines, often dealing with adversities and tragic fates, thus reflecting the limited perspectives of female agency of the time. However, with the advent of television as the dominant medium in Japan during the late 1950s and early 1960s and the subsequent saturation of the publishing market by the 1970s (Poupée, 2010), there was a significant change in production practices and themes addressed. This evolution was marked by the emergence of female artists in the 1960s, who, through participation in editorial competitions promoted by magazines, began to give a new direction to the genre, introducing elements of romantic comedy and, subsequently, more complex and articulated narratives.

In the 1970s, the so-called Year 24 Group propelled shōjo manga into what has been called their golden age, expanding the thematic and stylistic boundaries of the genre and addressing issues of gender, politics, and sexuality with unprecedented maturity and complexity (Shamoon, 2012). This period marked a fundamental turning point in the perception of manga as a space for artistic expression and cultural reflection, contributing to a broader recognition of the manga medium within the Japanese and international cultural landscapes.

The mediological and sociological approach to understanding *shōjo manga* requires an analysis that considers the socio-cultural dynamics and the mediation processes that characterized Japan in the 1970s. During this period, there was a significant transformation in the media and cultural scenes, which offered new expressive opportunities for manga creators, allowing them to explore previously marginalized or censored themes, such as politics and sexuality. The mangas produced by the Year 24 Group clearly show this process by actively redefining the boundaries of public discourse and participating in the emergence of new collective sensibilities. The rise of this group is inseparable from the context of profound social change of the period, marked by the influence of the 1960s counterculture and student protest movements. The thematic boldness of these manga, therefore, should not be seen simply as an isolated stylistic or narrative choice, but as part of a broader process of cultural transformation, in which manga played a leading role in reflecting on identity, gender, and power. Through the representation of political and sexual issues, these works offered individuals new languages and imaginaries to interpret and negotiate their place in society, thus contributing to a redefinition of cultural practices and social relationships.

Through the lens of media ecology (Fuller, 2005; Scolari, 2012), *shōjo manga* can be seen not only as cultural products but as active agents that participate in the constitution and negotiation of meanings, identities, and relationships within society. This perspective is particularly fruitful for the analysis of the narrative ecosystem revolving around Riyoko Ikeda's *Berusaikyū no Bara*, known in Italy as *Le rose di Versailles* and more famously for the anime *Lady Oscar*. As Marco Pellitteri (2010, p. 4) points out:

Starting from the 1960s, a large slice of this production, mostly cartoons and comics, became famous amongst American, and then eventually European, producers. In the late 1970s, because of a series of business and historical conjunctions [...] a huge quantity of Japanese animated series and then Japanese comics came to Europe, causing an important change in the mediatic structure and in the tastes of the young public. As we will see, for years Italy has been, with France, the European country with the most central part in this process.

The penetration of Japanese anime into the Italian cultural fabric starting from the mid-1970s can thus be interpreted as a phenomenon of cultural mediation – a process where cultural products are adapted and integrated into a different culture, facilitating understanding and exchange between diverse cultural backgrounds – that deeply marked the imaginary of the new generations formed in those years. This process of media globalization inaugurated an era of interconnection between the West and the East, outlining the contours of a new cultural identity influenced by narratives, aesthetics, and values from Japan. The widespread diffusion of anime through the television system constituted a turning point in the media ecosystem of the time, bringing to the fore new modes of consumption, interpretation, and identification for young Italians.

The introduction of Japanese anime contributed to reshaping the dynamics of cultural belonging and media consumption practices. The so-called “Goldrake generation” (Pellitteri, 1999; Teti, 2018) emerged as a generational group, whose socialization was significantly influenced by an exposure to these works, diverging from the cultural and educational models of previous generations (Di Paola and Busi Rizzi, 2023).

The success of anime in Italy and in France highlights the role of media as agents of cultural transformation, capable of facilitating the flow of ideas, styles, and narratives across geographical and cultural boundaries. The success of these products, made possible also by relatively low licensing and translation costs, anticipated the dynamics of content globalization that characterize the digital era, foreshadowing the spread of transmedia practices that today dominate the media landscape.

The internationalization strategy adopted by Japanese production companies, in response to the discovery of a receptive Western market, materialized in an innovative fusion of Eastern and Western narratives, historical, and mythological elements, generating a phenomenon of cultural hybridization that gave life to generation-defining anime series. This “syncretism”, evident in *Lady Oscar* but also in works like *Tiger Mask*, *Lupin III*, *Dragon Ball*, etc., reflected a process of narrative construction aimed at thematic universality, making these products relevant for a global audience and particularly appreciated by younger generations.

The appeal of these narratives lies in their ability to address the anxieties, crises, and adolescent conflicts distinctive of an era marked by the competitive individualism associated with yuppies culture. In a social context where success models and relational dynamics have been deeply influenced by market logics and competition, anime offered young viewers a repertoire of stories in which the search for identity, friendship, courage, and justice emerge as central values, thus providing emotional and cognitive responses to the challenges of growing up (Di Paola and Busi Rizzi, 2023).

The integration of these anime into a sprawling media ecosystem, which includes television, video games, comics, role-playing games, action figures, and fan culture, has amplified their cultural impact. The pervasiveness of these media, combined with the ability to generate vast networks of fans, has transformed the consumption of anime into an immersive experience, capable of offering social and behavioral models with a profound educational impact. In this context, anime transcends mere entertainment, playing a pivotal role in the emotional and social education of the first generation to grow up with diverse media platforms. Initially a revolutionary force in the 1970s, anime’s influence remained significant through the 1990s and 2000s. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the development and proliferation of different media platforms further amplified anime’s impact. The popularity of anime and manga characters and styles extended into video games, illustrating how these cultural artifacts facilitated complex processes of socialization, enriching the cultural landscape and shaping the social experiences of their audience. This has found a tangible effect in the Cool Japan cultural policies that the Japanese government developed to promote national culture and identity abroad, effectively emphasizing manga style and art across the globe to increase Japan’s attractiveness to foreigners (Tamaki, 2019).

2. The roses of international success

The Rose of Versailles, known internationally as *Lady Oscar*, embodies a cultural and media phenomenon that transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries of its native Japan. This manga, serialized in the “Margaret” magazine from May 21, 1972, to December 23, 1973, and later published in nine *tankōbon* volumes, has given rise to two spin-offs and ten additional stories, further consolidating its cultural impact through five additional *tankōbon* volumes. The work crossed media boundaries, expanding into various formats: from the stage with the Takarazuka Revue musicals since 1974, to the big screen with Jacques Demy’s film in 1979 (Duggan, 2013b), and into the television dimension with a 40-episodes anime series produced by Tokyo Movie Shinsha in the same year, under the direction of Tadao Nagahama and Osamu Dezaki.

In Italy, the introduction and success of *Lady Oscar* are closely linked to the television broadcast of the anime series, which adopted the international title derived from Demy’s film. Its first airing dates back to 1982 on the channel Italia 1. In France, the anime found its place in the programming of Antenne 2, debuting on September 8, 1986, in the *Récré A2 show*, marking another important chapter in its international spread and reinforcing its status as a transmedia and transcultural work.

Its history of dissemination, in Italy and France, reflects the complex dynamics of globalization, localization, and cultural hybridization that characterize the modern media landscape, highlighting the central role of media in facilitating intercultural dialogue and in the construction of transnational collective identities.

Ikeda’s creation is a pioneering work in the manga and anime universe, and it offered an innovative and complex representation of femininity through the figure of Oscar François de Jarjayes. The character of Oscar, raised as a man at the behest of her father, creates a narrative that challenges gender conventions, while also offering deep reflection on themes such as social justice, inequalities, love, and friendship.

The manga and anime, set in a period of significant change like that preceding the French Revolution, use the figure of Oscar to explore the tension between traditionally assigned gender roles and the multilayered reality of individual identity. This character, who navigates the conflicting expectations of male gender roles in her position as the commander of the Royal Guard and her innate femininity, offers a narrative that values gender fluidity and the search for one’s identity.

Through Oscar, the manga highlights how social constructions of gender can be questioned and redefined, anticipating contemporary discussions related to feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, Ikeda’s work stands as a text that promotes a complex view of the individual, capable of overcoming the barriers imposed by social conventions to affirm their uniqueness and freedom.

If the success of the work endures today, it is likely due to the continuous and tireless work of fans around the world. The passion and dedication of these enthusiasts, as highlighted by Elena Romanello (2022) in *La Leggenda di Lady Oscar. Guida non ufficiale* (a 600-page book written with the love, passion, and expertise of a long-time fan), play a crucial role in keeping alive the dialogue and interest around the work, continuously feeding the corpus of materials associated with the narrative universe through fan art, fan fiction, critical analysis, and reinterpretations.

The involvement of the fandom, which transcends national borders uniting Italian fans and those from around the world, underscores the importance of fan communities in the

cultural signification process (Jenkins, 2006). These groups not only keep the focus on the original work alive, but they also expand it, integrating new content that reflects a range of interpretations and perspectives. The tragic fate of Oscar François de Jarjayes acts as a catalyst for an uninterrupted creative production that engages in the exploration of numerous “what ifs” left open by the original story, allowing the work to transcend its original context and to constantly renew itself.

The creative ecosystem generated by the *Lady Oscar* fandom embraces a variety of artistic and critical expressions, from drawings that reinvent the appearance of characters, to studies that delve into the historical context of the French Ancien régime. This polyphony of voices enriches the work with new layers of meaning and opens new spaces for discussion and appreciation.

A study conducted by French sociologist Nathalie Nadaud-Albertini (2013) shows how these fan-created narratives not only extend the narrative life of Oscar de Jarjayes but also establish a critical dialogue with the original work’s interpretation of femininity. In this dynamic, fanfictions become a digital space where Oscar’s femininity is continuously negotiated and reinterpreted.

The protagonist of *Lady Oscar* provides a rich narrative foundation for exploring the fluidities and contradictions of gender identity. However, the fanfiction community, drawing on the complexity of this character, often chooses to rework her femininity in ways more traditionally conforming to gender norms, suggesting alternative paths that bring Oscar back to identifying within a conventional femininity context.

This approach to Oscar’s character opens up an interesting dialectic between the conservation and transgression of gender norms. On the one hand, the reinterpretation of the protagonist in a more traditionally feminine light can be seen as an attempt to reconcile her identity with a predominantly binary gender system in the importing country; at the same time, her feminine side in the manga emphasizes Oscar’s transgressive way of perceiving herself and her gender: transgressive, because no matter what gender she chooses to align with, goes against the established social norms and everyone’s gender expectations.

On the other hand, the creative process itself, which questions and redefines the original work’s notion of femininity, highlights the capacity of fanfictions to act as spaces for debate and cultural resistance, where conventions can be challenged and redefined. It is also important to emphasize how fanfictions embody a form of feminism, where authors navigate the complex dynamics of power, identity, and gender. Through fanfictions, the *Lady Oscar* fandom actively participates in the construction and reinterpretation of the work’s meaning, making it a glaring example of the importance of fandoms as critical spaces for discussion and cultural negotiation.

3. “A rose will always be a rose” also watched in streaming

This tremendous emotional wave that links *Lady Oscar* to its audience has led to the anime’s return on video-on-demand streaming services; in Italy, from September 1, 2023, all episodes are available on Prime Video (while in France, it is broadcast by Apple TV+). This process uses nostalgia as a targeted marketing strategy to attract the audience, capitalizing on the collective desire to return, at least emotionally, to past periods:

The action of memory and nostalgia in relation to media products is twofold: on one hand, the content of a specific object can present (more or less directly) characteristics capable of triggering a nostalgic response. On the other hand, the media products themselves (also because of their physical supports) can become over time, regardless of their content, the objects of a memorial (nostalgic) action of remembrance and identification by their users (Busi Rizzi, 2023, p. 89, our translation).

As Pomarico (2019, p. 103) points out, we are probably facing a loss of appeal of the present. The recent revival of the anime *Lady Oscar* through streaming services can be interpreted through the concept of “archive fever” outlined by Jacques Derrida (1996). The decision to re-propose this anime (and many other media products from the recent past) exploits the audience’s nostalgia, evoking a desire to return to an era perceived as simpler or more significant, despite the temporal distances and the sociocultural evolutions that have taken place.

In this sense, “archive fever” manifests in the tension between the present and the past, where the present seems to lose some of its dynamic appeal in favour of an idealized past. *Lady Oscar*, with its complex characters and narrative infused with themes of justice, gender identity, and revolution, becomes an imaginary place to which the audience wishes to return.

However, the revival of *Lady Oscar* not only facilitates the rediscovery of this anime by first-time fans but also paves the way for new generations of viewers and new models of consumption. The concept of affordance, namely the possibilities for action offered by an environment or a device, plays a crucial role in the analysis of how *Lady Oscar* is consumed in the digital age. Streaming platforms, with their ability to offer on-demand access to a vast catalogue of content, allow users to personalize their viewing experience, choosing not only what to watch but also when and on which device. This flexibility increases the appeal of classic series, making them more accessible than traditional television programming.

The transition of *Lady Oscar* consumption from mainstream television to streaming services is part of a media and cultural transformation that concerns not only how content is distributed and consumed but also how it fosters community building and socialization among viewers. This metamorphosis highlights a fundamental change in consumption dynamics, reflecting both the technological affordances of streaming platforms (Evens *et al.*, 2024) and the social and cultural needs of modern viewers.

In the era of mainstream television, *Lady Oscar* was a fixed appointment that brought viewers together in front of the screen at specific times, creating a collective and synchronized viewing experience. This regular programming not only established a shared ritual but also facilitated the formation of fan communities bound by the shared anticipation and post-viewing discussion of new episodes.

With the transition to streaming services, the anime becomes accessible at any time, transforming consumption into a more individualized experience. Viewers have the freedom to start, pause, and resume watching according to their own timing, making content consumption more adaptable to personal needs. Despite the personalization of viewing, streaming platforms contribute to the construction of new forms of online communities, as demonstrated by features that allow shared viewing and social media hashtags that facilitate discussion and interaction among fans (Tirino, 2020).

This aspect is reinforced by the use of second screens and social media, which enrich the streaming experience. Furthermore, streaming platforms are aware of this social dimension and have developed features like Teleparty or Watch Party, which allow people to watch series virtually together and initiate online conversations about the programs they are watching. These digital tools offer spaces for socialization and sharing experiences related to *Lady Oscar*, enabling fans to explore themes, characters, and narratives together, regardless of their geographical location. The availability of the anime on streaming services also fuels nostalgia, attracting both new viewers and those who wish to relive the original experience. This sense of nostalgia not only strengthens the emotional bond with the work but also stimulates the creation of fan-made content, online discussions, and analyses, contributing to keeping the work alive over time. In short, nostalgia is not simply a yearning for the past but a bridge that connects the past to the present in complex and nuanced ways, allowing for the continuous exploration and reinterpretation of the meaning and value of our shared cultural narratives.

4. Transmasculinity and class struggle(s)

In 1970s Japan, similarly to other countries, the women's liberation movement became an active and visible presence within society, leading women to rediscuss their role and identity. It is no secret that Ikeda developed her manga, *The Rose of Versailles*, inspired by the social events of her time. Oscar expresses a form of liberation from gender stereotypes and expectations as a transmasculine character, while at the same time she explores her own identity in a fluid way – paraphrasing Butler's word, performing gender and causing trouble (Butler, 1990).

In the first issue of the manga, Oscar's gender is made very clear from her first appearance: a baby girl is born, and announced as such, and her father declares her name will be Oscar and that she will be raised as a boy to ensure his lineage. In that same first issue, however, gender identity's boundaries get blurred towards the end, when Oscar is believed to be a man by the Princess Marie Antoinette, who is attracted and fascinated by Oscar and shocked to learn that she is not a man. This kind of misunderstanding is a leitmotif of the manga, in which Oscar is regularly addressed using male and/or female pronouns and taken for a man while at the same time widely recognized as a woman. To add elements of queerness to the plot and Oscar's representation and aura, many of the heterosexual ladies at the court of Versailles express attraction towards her, conscious that she is (and identify as) a woman: "If he really a man, I would immediately pursue him" (Ikeda, 1990, vol. 25, p. 88; our translation).

While the manga plays around Oscar's ambiguous gender projection, there is no ambivalence in Oscar's own gender perception: she identifies as a woman *and a soldier*. It is this identification with her role as royal guard that adds a traditional (and exterior) masculine identity to Oscar. It is worth noting, however, that as a soldier Oscar *performs* a traditionally *masculine* role – there's no virility in the depiction of her masculine side. On the contrary, gender fluidity is more emphasized by the feminine features of Oscar's servant, closest friend, and then lover, André. As it has been previously pointed out, André's appearance increasingly diverges from the masculine standard of beauty (Anan, 2014), and it evolves

into an increasingly queer look following the evolution of his bond with Oscar. Their relationship, once it becomes sexual, highlights the androgynous features of the two, their bodies depicted in a similar way, their embrace “exud[ing] homoeroticism” (Anan, 2014, p. 49).

The same cannot be said about Oscar’s (scarce) encounters with her first love interest, the Swedish count Hans Axel von Fersen, in which her feminine features emerge and contrast with the Count’s masculine characteristics, both physical and behavioral. In an emotional backlit scene, for example, the silhouettes of Fersen and Oscar reveal the highly masculine features of the first and the highly feminine body of the latter (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 51). It is again in a scene with Fersen that Oscar shows her feminine features and beauty for the first time. In a moment of pain for her unrequited love towards Fersen, Oscar participates in a ball fully dressed as a woman, following the fashion of the time. While she is technically in an undercover mission to catch a mysterious thief, Oscar’s feelings towards Fersen are clearly the reason why she joins the French aristocracy and decides to blend in and embrace her femininity. This event is more striking if compared to the beginning of the manga, when she initially refuses to accept Marie Antoinette’s invitation to a ball in Versailles, and only gives in to fulfil her duty towards the princess (and dresses in her high uniform that enhances her androgynous figure).

Marie Antoinette and Fersen are instead representative of a stereotypical heterosexual relationship in which the woman seeks salvation and hope in the man, whose main role is that of protecting the woman he loves. In a way, the French Queen and the Swedish Count represent a highly romanticized historical version of the trope of the damsel in distress, where the couple is gender conforming and there is no space for androgyny. The differences between the heterosexual relationship represented by Marie Antoinette and Fersen and the gender fluidity of the couple André-Oscar are striking and make it for a revolutionary representation of queer relationships in *shōjo manga*. In this respect, *The Rose of Versailles* sets a precedent and an example that contributed to the transformation of the genre (Shamoon, 2007).

Romantic feelings are therefore the force that makes Oscar question her appearance. Fersen is in love with Marie Antoinette, who is always highly feminine and fully fulfils the expected female look. There is no ambivalence or androgyny in Marie Antoinette’s appearance; in fact, her beauty and feminine elegance is one of her key features. This alignment with expectations and unquestionable gender identity can also be seen as a metaphor for the class conflict developing in the background: the historically accurate facts are connected with the Japanese women’s gender liberation of the 1970s. Just like the poorest classes struggle to survive and emerge as autonomous and free individuals, women’s gender identity is also a struggle, represented metaphorically by Oscar’s ambivalent look and her inner struggles. If she has no doubts about her own gender identity and what her role in society is, emotionally Oscar often struggles to make her masculine and feminine sides coexist. In other words, Oscar identifies herself as a soldier, openly rejects feminine clothes and appearance, but suffers when it comes to expressing her feelings towards a man (Hans Axel von Fersen) and to rejecting another woman’s romantic feelings (Rosalie’s). At first, Rosalie mistakes Oscar for a man as anyone else, but unlike many of Oscar’s close friends, keeps seeing him as a man also after learning that she is a woman. Rosalie ultimately falls in love with him without ever considering Oscar’s gender as a problem. It is instead Oscar who struggles with her gender because of Rosalie’s

suffering at her incapability of reciprocating her romantic feelings. In front of the pain of unrequited love – the same that she feels towards Fersen who sees her as a soldier more than a woman – Oscar regrets not being a “real man”: “If I had been a real man...how much suffering I could have avoided” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 33, p. 52; our translation). The “real man” is therefore someone who can protect women from suffering, and protection is the key role embraced by Oscar not only as a soldier in charge of the Queen’s protection, but also in her role within society: she protects her mother, the peasants in her family’s lands, children and, more generally, the “weak”. The only exception being André, who protects her whenever he can, demonstrating how he sees her as a woman contrary to Fersen, who sees her as a strong and independent individual who does not need anyone’s protection. Oscar’s struggles with her own gender identity go hand in hand with her raising awareness of the faults of the higher classes who have taken for granted their privilege and lived without questioning their role within society. It is only halfway through the manga that we learn that Oscar had questioned her gender identity: “When I was a kid, for a long time, I thought I was a man” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 82). There is no further exploration of Oscar’s journey of self-discovery, but it is interesting to note how it is again the rejection of another woman’s love that makes Oscar regret her womanhood. Over the course of the manga, Oscar’s gender non-conformity was never questioned by other characters, and it is accepted and embraced as her own personal identity.

While men are portrayed showing their feelings, tears included, as much as women, when it comes to the representation of Oscar’s gender her depiction as a woman is visually explicit when she is in a vulnerable state, whereas her features are more androgynous and masculine when she is in action or shows feelings of anger and/or revenge. These representations follow a more traditional iconography and reinforce the stereotypical images that see women as fragile beings in need of protection. It is the coexistence of both attitudes that make Oscar a revolutionary comics character, especially for 1970s Japan (and 1990s Italy). Furthermore, the identification (and portrayal) of weaknesses with womanhood and poverty reinforces the metaphorical connection between class struggle and women’s liberation. Looking at *The Rose of Versailles* as a *bildungsroman*, the evolution of the main character (and of André) becomes an all-round psychological and moral growth encompassing gender identity and acceptance (André representing Oscar’s true love and the only man who embraces her gender nonconformity) as well as social justice and values. Oscar’s moral evolution is particularly evident in both respects: she questions her transmasculinity and is scared her gender nonconformity might push away the man she loves (Fersen) and starts doubting the righteousness of the system and class she belongs to.

Ikeda’s work undoubtedly marks an important step in addressing feminist and queer issues and anticipates contemporary discussions; it presents contradictions in the representation of homosexuality. As mentioned, and as explored by some manga scholars (Shamoon, 2012; Duggan, 2013a), queerness and homosexuality are widely recurrent themes in *Lady Oscar*. However, Ikeda also openly rejects homosexuality in a series of scenes that address the famous “Affair of the Diamond Necklace” (1784-85). During the fictional trial of Jeanne de la Motte, responsible for the theft of the necklace, the thief accuses the French Queen of revenge for the ending of their homosexual relationship (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 31, p. 69). To defend herself and show the bad character of Marie Antoinette, Jeanne publicly states that the Queen was also having a relationship with Oscar, who reacts to the accusation with anger: “A homosexual?! Me?! I’ll kill her!” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 70).

Oscar's shock and rejection of homosexuality is reiterated a few pages later: "How can I be a lesbian?! It makes me itchy, like an allergy" (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 33, p. 73). Such a strong negative reaction by a gender fluid character might be seen both as a homophobic comment and a rejection of labels. Given Ikeda's political activism and her other artistic work on transmasculinity, the latter appears to be the most probable explanation. There is, however, another potential explanation, rooted in Oscar's fear of never being able to experience love. First, her father rejected her femininity; then, Fersen falls in love with the highly feminine Marie Antoinette, and sees Oscar as a friend and fellow soldier. Being labelled as a lesbian, and publicly recognized as attracted to women, may have caused Fersen, and André, or any other man, never to see her as a woman. From this perspective, the open rejection of homosexuality could represent another aspect of gender non-conforming and transmasculine individuals: not being lovable, and not being seen for who they are.

5. Gender fluidity and language: *Lady Oscar's* adaptation in Italy

Oscar's gender is no secret for anyone at the court of Versailles, where she was known to be a woman. This makes for an interesting case for the study of the Italian adaptation of *Lady Oscar*, in which the use of pronouns reflects Oscar's gender fluidity.

The Italian version of the manga uses pronouns to highlight Oscar's transmasculinity, adapting in this direction the Japanese original version, in which feminine or gender-neutral pronouns are most often used by Oscar to refer to herself. In the Italian translation, in every first encounter with someone new Oscar is mistaken for a man and addressed with masculine pronouns. She herself uses masculine pronouns most of the time to refer to herself, as the majority of the people in her family do, with the only exception of her nanny⁴¹. André too uses masculine pronouns, although in his thoughts he thinks about and refers to Oscar as a woman, pronouns included, showing the same fluidity in his perception of Oscar's gender as Oscar herself. The Italian translation of the manga is therefore aligned with the journey of gender awareness of the protagonist, reflecting in the use of pronouns Oscar's fluidity. The anime, however, does not follow the same pattern, and instead shifts the gender discourse towards a more traditional and stereotyped representation. Such a difference is particularly noticeable in how Rosalie addresses Oscar. In the manga, she always uses the title "Mr." (*signor*), which was changed into *mademoiselle* ("madamigella") in the Italian version of the anime. The anime depicts Oscar as a woman, and any trace of queerness disappears, with the adoption of the third person plural polite form of addressing (*voi*) used to neutralize Oscar's gender nonconformity. It might be argued that the use of the *voi* could be a form of neutral pronoun, hence reflecting the original Japanese version, but in the early 1980s, when the anime was released in its Italian version, the debate around the use of neutral pronouns in Italian was yet to begin. It was only in 1986 that a first document on the sexist use of the Italian language was published (Sabatini, 1986), and while it would be revolutionary to see *Lady Oscar* as a pioneering translation model for Italian neutral pronouns, facts point towards the adoption of the *voi* to avoid feminine or masculine pronouns rather than to a conscious attempt at promoting a neutral language system. The generalized use of the pronoun *voi* can be thus seen as reinforcing the portrayal of Oscar's

⁴¹ The nanny, who's also André's grandmother, never sees Oscar's masculine side, always calls her mademoiselle, and suffers every time that Oscar refuses to wear feminine clothes.

fluidity. By employing non-specific pronouns, the narrative underscores the ambiguity and versatility of Oscar's identity. This linguistic choice – either conscious or simply led by a traditional use of the polite form of addressing by translators – ends up highlighting the character's ability to transcend rigid boundaries, reflecting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of identity. The deliberate ambiguity in pronoun usage allows readers to appreciate the complexity of Oscar's persona, emphasizing that identity can be multifaceted and dynamic rather than fixed and binary. Through the use of *voi*, which substitutes the informal second person singular *tu* originally used in the Italian version of the manga, Oscar loses part of her transmasculinity in the anime, and it contributes to portray her as a woman who dresses in masculine clothes, without queer elements. This leads to the change of Jeanne's storyline and to the alteration of some of the historical facts reproduced by Ikeda in the manga. Jeanne presents herself as a victim of Marie Antoinette and Oscar's thirst for power, rather than a target of Marie Antoinette's homosexual desires, a popular gossip during the reign of Louis XVI (Goodman, 2003, p. 139). It is Jeanne who summarizes Oscar's peculiar role in the court as that of a “woman dressed in man's clothes”, and although there is a hint to such a rare attire – “isn't it strange that [Marie Antoinette] has such a close relationship with a woman dressed as a man?” (Ep. 23, our translation) – ultimately Oscar is depicted as a woman looking to gain power through the favours of the Queen.

Although the Italian version of the anime does not create any confusion about Oscar's gender, the reception in Italy of the character's transmasculinity has left its mark, as shown by the success of the series. To better understand the impact of *Lady Oscar*, a survey was conducted among a sample audience of 91 people. Through 11 questions, it emerged that *The Rose of Versailles* rose to fame in Italy through the anime and was mostly watched by children aged between 6-8.

Specifically, through the questionnaires it has emerged that:

1. On average, its audience was born between 1979 and 2000, and is therefore predominantly composed of individuals from Generation Y or Millennials. Such a response is not surprising considering that 1976-1990 are the decades when Japanese anime were first broadcast on Italian television and raised a public debate on their content and impact on the children who consumed them (Pellitteri, 1999, p. 128; Teti, 2011). If we accept the notion that a generation develops its own collective identity during its formative years, and that this identity fully emerges as its members reach adulthood and begin to make independent decisions that affect both their private and public lives (Mannheim, 2019 [1928]; Merico, 2019), it is crucial to consider the profound impact that media can have on the collective imagination and the social practices of these generations. The impact of anime on the popular imagination of the generation born in the 1980s was such that a new term was coined to define Italian children and adolescents that grew up during this first wave of anime consumption: the “Goldrake generation” (Pellitteri, 1999; Teti, 2011). Anime became a fundamental element of the formative experiences for the generation that grew up with mainstream television in the 1980s and 1990s. Integrated into the television programming and consumption models of that era, anime not only provided entertainment but also created communal rituals and shared symbolic experiences. TV programs aimed at children and adolescents, featuring Japanese animation, conveyed cultural values that helped forge a sense of generational belonging, and contributed to create a shared culture that deeply resonated with their viewers.

The impact of this kind of cultural consumption marks a generational change not only for the type of medium used to consume culture (the TV), but also for the exposure and absorption of Japanese cultural models disseminated by mainstream media. This sets apart the “Goldrake generation” from their parents and creates a unifying and common identity at the core of generational shifts (Benecchi, 2005) that combined to other socio-cultural features set generations apart. If we define a generation in socio-anthropological terms, characterized by distinctive elements such as shared experiences, significant events, rituals, and myths (Tirino, 2022), it becomes essential to recognize the influential role of television programs like *Lady Oscar*. These programs not only reflect but also shape the collective consciousness and cultural identity of a generation. By weaving together historical narratives and contemporary themes, shows like *Lady Oscar* contribute to the formation of a shared cultural memory, underscoring their significance in the socio-anthropological landscape⁴². These programs enabled young people to engage with the complexities of the real world by reflecting their values and dilemmas in the narratives presented. This content and these communicative modes provided a broad spectrum of choices, allowing individuals and communities to articulate their identities and assert their decision-making autonomy. The choices related to culture, media, and identity that emerge from this context – manifested through the use of communication technologies, media habits, and symbolic consumption – underscore the significant role of media in shaping cultural practices. These practices, in turn, guide young people through the delicate transition to adulthood, acting as a bridge between personal and collective identity within the broader social fabric.

2. The historical setting, Oscar’s courage and gender ambiguity are the elements that most attracted the attention of the audience of the time. This type of response provides some insight into the taste of the audience at the time of their first consumption of *Lady Oscar*. If seen against Italian comics’ fictionalization of history, a tradition clearly shown by the unique Disney’s literary and historical parodies (Argiolas *et al.*, 2013), the fascination of the Italian audience with historical drama is not surprising. It shows, in fact, how *Lady Oscar* fit into the Italian popular imagination, and likely contributed to the initial success of the anime series. Moreover, *Lady Oscar* is set during a time of profound historical upheaval, the French Revolution, a period marked by a fervent demand for liberty, equality, and fraternity – a historical era deeply embedded in the Italian and French imaginations, thus facilitating the cultural consumption (as well as dissemination and popularity) in both Italy and France of a product rooted in that historical context. These ideals not only shaped the course of history but to this day continue to influence contemporary discussions on civil rights, social justice, and democracy. The series, by situating itself in this historical context, touches on universal themes that transcend temporal and geographical specifics, thus allowing for an exploration of ethics, power, and social change in ways that remain relevant today. *Lady Oscar* provides a vivid portrayal of the class and gender dynamics of the time, illustrating how they influenced personal interactions and individual trajectories. The protagonist, a woman who takes on a traditionally male role, challenges gender norms and reflects the tensions between personal identity and societal expectations. This gender ambiguity not only adds complexity to the character but also opens a dialogue on gender identity and women’s rights. The narrative is further enriched by a blend of historical drama and

⁴² Popular anime and manga that distinguished Italian Millennials from previous and later generations include *Lupin III*; *Candy Candy*; *Creamy Mami, the Magic Angel*; *Love Me, My Knight*; *Marmalade Boy*; *Pokémon*, and *Dragon Ball* – only to mention a few.

personal entanglements, such as love stories, betrayals, and tragedies, which ensure a strong emotional engagement of the audience. This mix is strategically effective: while the historical drama provides a broad context and a rich backdrop, the personal entanglements add immediacy and accessibility to the narrative, allowing viewers to emotionally connect with the characters and their stories.

3. The anime remained the main and only medium through which the product was consumed (83.5% of the sample), confirming how the success of *The Rose of Versailles* is linked to new forms of media consumption of a specific generation. The popularity of anime in Italy preceded the dissemination of manga and for many Millennials represented the only medium of consumption of Japanese popular culture. This found further confirmation in another question of the questionnaire asking what was the main medium used to consume *Lady Oscar*, to which the sample responded the TV. The information gathered also highlights how the consumption of *Lady Oscar* was mostly a casual form of consumption (80.2% of the sample). This data is not only consistent with the specific features of the television medium at a time where on-demand services were not available, but also with the age range of the sample. The type of medium used and the age range of the first viewing of *Lady Oscar* are consistent with changes brought to media consumption by technological advancement, and it coincides with the generational markers. Millennials who performed a casual consumption of *Lady Oscar* did predominantly using the television medium. The casual consumption of *Lady Oscar* suggests that while the tv series may have not been the focal interest of children, it still had a significant impact on its audience. Such involvement in cultural consumption reflected the nature of the tv show schedule of the time, when children could run into various programs while casually viewing tv or during pre-established broadcasting time slots. Despite the non-committal nature of this type of consumption, the impact these tv shows could have on children were profound and contributed to the formation of cultural and individual memory. Furthermore, the data reflects the general tendencies of media consumption of the generations that grew up between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This phase was characterized by an intense and significant evolution of media and technology, although television remained a key source of entertainment and information for adults and young people alike. Television was the core of domestic entertainment and engaged with children through programs created *ad hoc* for them, featuring animations and anime like *Lady Oscar*, regularly broadcast on a daily basis. Such a targeted show schedule represented an important – and often first and only – form of access to popular culture (and narrative) for children and adolescents.

4. Who watched the product as an adult used streaming platforms, mainly YouTube and Prime. The correlation between a transition from a television-based consumption to digital platforms among adult and younger audiences – that is to say among Millennials and Generation Z – mirrors the general changes in media consumption. The rise in numbers of streaming services and online platforms for cultural consumption shows a shift into a more personalized, on-demand cultural consumption. The availability of *Lady Oscar* on streaming platforms is situated at the intersection of various significant mediological and sociological factors. It exploits nostalgia as a targeted marketing strategy, evoking a desire to return to an era perceived as simpler or more meaningful. The past becomes an idealized refuge, a phenomenon amplified by digital accessibility that allows past media experiences to be re-lived at any moment. Streaming platforms alter the traditional relationship between viewers

and media content. Instead of being bound to a television schedule, users can now watch *Lady Oscar* whenever they prefer, on various devices, and can pause and resume viewing at their convenience. The ability to freely access *Lady Oscar* content allows for continuous reinterpretation of its cultural and historical significance. This process not only fuels nostalgia but also provides opportunities for broader reflections on identity, collective memory, and the ways in which popular culture is consumed and reconsidered over time.

5. For the majority of the sample, it was a one-time consumption (60.4%) followed by a re-watch of the series as an adult (24.2%). This reflects the casual viewing registered, confirming how *Lady Oscar* was part of Millennial's childhood experience of cultural consumption fuelled by the expanding television medium, and the popularity of the newly imported Japanese animation. Consistent with this form of childhood consumption, the iconography of *Lady Oscar* is not used as a means of communication on social media (e.g., memes), although it remains linked to childhood memories.

6. When asked to make a (optional) final comment, the majority of the answers given reveal that while watching the anime did not have a relevant impact on the sample's queer identity, it left a mark in different ways. First, even though there was no doubt about Oscar's gender identity (female), the ambivalence of her appearance interested the audience as children. Second, the audience remembered being attracted by Oscar's strength and determination, becoming an inspiring character for both queer and non-queer respondents; third, it helped the queer respondents better understand their gender identity's journey retrospectively. Overall, the historical setting emerges as one of the main factors that interested the audience in the first place, but in the end it was Oscar's androgyny that caught everyone's attention.

Conclusion

Lady Oscar is still being broadcast on Italian television to this day. For the generations born between the late 1970s and the early 2000s, it entered their culture via the anime adaptation watched as part of the consumption of Italian television programs aimed at children. It was, ultimately, an entertainment product that reached a wide audience and that contributed to the creation of Italian children's popular imagination. Oscar's gender nonconformity was, for generations that grew up with very few queer and/or non-binary characters, the first encounter with a gender model that could attract both boys and girls. It offered a model for any child as it portrayed a strong and determined woman who could do anything she wanted; a queer person who found its own identity and place in society without fitting into pre-established labels; a man who could show and be in touch with its emotions. The Italian translations of the Japanese revolutionary manga show the importance of the use of pronouns, and how they can be used to determine the perception of gender identity. *Lady Oscar* and its media adaptations remain a pioneering work that show how an individual's emancipation and growth can be limited by stereotypes and standardized models, and that the affirmation of one's own identity can mean the detachment from the society of origins.

The analysis of *Lady Oscar*, its adaptation and consumption, show how popular culture can go beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, holding a wide appeal in different contexts, like in France and Italy. It shows how Ikeda created and mediated universal

themes, and how the Japanese cultural industry was able to take advantage of the development of the media system and the process of globalisation to export its products. Such international success was made possible also because of generational attitudes, and specifically Gen Y's tendency to welcome new media cultures.

The advent of digital cultural products and streaming services shows how classic narratives can find new life and, consequently, relevance in an era characterised by a fragmented and personalized media consumption, offering opportunities to new generations to (re)discover and reinterpret cultural products that marked the childhood of today's adults.

Furthermore, the dynamics of nostalgia and the active participation of the fandom continue to stimulate a process of rediscovery and reinterpretation that allows the work to continuously adapt to changing media and cultural conditions.

It can be stated that *Lady Oscar* also played a significant educational and formative role, often filling gaps left by traditional educational institutions, especially regarding themes like gender identity, which were nearly absent in schools of that era. The anime introduced and addressed issues of gender and identity fluidity in ways that formal institutions often avoided or ignored. This series offered an alternative platform for exploring complex and sometimes controversial concepts, acting as an alternative and complementary educator.

Oscar herself represents a disruptive educational influence compared to the gender normative schemas promoted by formal institutions of the time. Through her character, young audiences could see a role model that not only challenged rigid gender norms but also promoted values of courage, integrity, and justice. In this sense, the series provided important lessons on resisting social conventions and asserting one's own identity, themes that rarely found space in traditional school curricula.

Lady Oscar is a key element within a highly integrated production circuit, characterized by the ability of manga and anime to establish roots in international consumption systems. These works have effectively responded to the identity needs of a generation experiencing intense social, cultural, media, and technological changes. Among these changes are the globalization of markets, the advent of computer technologies, the rise of video games, the internationalization of television broadcasts, and significant political and social transformations, such as the triumph of neoliberalism and the easing of Cold War tensions. All these phenomena have contributed to redefining national and individual identities.

In this dynamic context, anime and manga have offered new narrative models that address themes such as generational conflict, the challenge to social conventions, and the exploration of complex and multifaceted identities. These themes have provided a new and often contrasting perspective to that of previous generations, sometimes arousing concern among parents and cultural elites⁴³.

⁴³ Interestingly, concerns about the influence of manga and anime continue to persist today, despite a significant reevaluation of their cultural roles. This ongoing apprehension is illustrated by the anxieties expressed by Walter Veltroni in 2021. In his article evocatively titled "Perché i manga hanno conquistato i nostri ragazzi" ("Why Manga Has Conquered Our Youth"), Veltroni articulates late concerns regarding the impact of these media on young people.

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