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ANNALISA PERROTTA*

“Speak; I will listen”. The Body and the Words in the Dialogue with the Nurse in Sixteenth-Century Italian Tragedy¹

Abstract

This essay examines the dialogue between the Nurse and the milk-daughter in a few Italian tragedies composed between 1514, when Gian Giorgio Trissino wrote *Sophonisba* and 1565, the year of Speroni's *Canace*. In the dialogues, the essay analyses the rhetorical construction of that common ground of communication that can be intimate, confiding, compassionate, or, at other times, modelling and prescriptive. Three nodes are at the centre of the investigation: 1. The relationship between Nurse and milk-daughter involves the body. The relationship's foundation is nourishment and care (many of the Nurse's interventions are due to her disposition to care). This bond is a product of male writers' imagination: which models drive the representation of such a visceral relationship between two women? The paper investigates how Renaissance authors used classical models to define the Nurse's role and function 2. The relationship between the Nurse and the protagonist is often indicative of the epistemological set-up of the tragedy: what does the Nurse know/understand about her dialogue partner? 3. The Nurse's role in unfolding the facts is crucial in evaluating her character in each work: she may be in line with the main diegetic thread or compete with it. Does the Nurse's advising construct an alternative narrative line to the unfolding tragedy, prefiguring another possible, non-tragic narrative world? The nurse character thus seems to associate the ancillary position with a symbolic and relational density only partially investigated so far.

KEYWORDS: Italian Renaissance tragedy; wet nurse; *Sophonisba*; *Rosmunda*; *Orbecche*; imitation; mother-daughter relationship

Introduction

This study analyses only a few texts within the variegated panorama of early 16th-century tragic production; however, it aims to provide an analysis of the Nurse's character easily extendable to other texts. I will focus on works that belong to the first decades of Neoclassical tragedy writing in Italy, par-

¹ “Orsù dite, che ascolto”. From Pietro Aretino, *La Orazia* (1546) 1.431 (translation mine).

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ticularly representative in themselves as well as influential on the later tradition. The selection of works is in line with the sixteenth-century editorial workshop illustrated in the Prologue to Ludovico Dolce's *Ifigenia* (1551; Cremante 1988, ix-x): *Sophonisba*, *Rosmunda*, *Orbecche*, *Canace* will be the objects of inquiry in the following pages.

My main claims are the following: first, the relationship between the Nurse and the milk daughter is indicative of the epistemological set-up of the tragedy. The Nurse is a collateral character, supportive of and in dialogue with the main characters. Her presence in the scene elicits the female character's words, her narrative, or the expression of her feelings. Precisely because of her position in the tragedy, the degree of her involvement in the action, and her direct relationship with the milk daughter, the Nurse endows the tragic action with expectations, judgements, hopes and emotions. In some cases, the Nurse can catch aspects of the milk daughter hidden even to the latter. Sometimes she understands what is going on and can counsel wisely, as in Giovanni Rucellai's *Rosmunda* (1516). In other cases, biases and prescriptive intentions compromise her vision, as in the case of Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio's *Orbecche* (1545). In conformity with the classical models, the Nurse is entrusted with "a counter-singing function to the protagonist" (Cremante 1988, 185). The 'counter-song' may serve to reassure and console the main character (in Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Sophonisba*, 1514-15 and Speroni's *Canace*), to discuss her positions or decisions (in Rucellai's *Rosmunda*), thereby enabling the development and fulfilment, the expansion of the tragic character.

Second, I argue that the role of the Nurse in the events is crucial to assess her character. She may appear aligned with the main diegetic line, or she may be in competition with it: in that case, her advice/opinion constructs an alternative narrative line, thereby prefiguring another possible narrative world (in Speroni Speroni's *Canace*, 1541) the Nurse tries to save her milk daughter from condemnation and death, in Rucellai's *Rosmunda* the tragic and idealistic character is counter-balanced by a pragmatic and effective Nurse).

My third claim is that in Italian literary works from the first half of the sixteenth century, the Nurse is a character still in the process of being defined, and this condition gives a space to elaborate models of affectivity between women. The tragedies of the 16th century offer a seemingly stable representation of the character; however, despite this appearance, the Nurse's character can vary in her attitudes and functions both in the plot and the dialogue with the milk-daughter. At the outset, the character's relationship with the milk-daughter is firmly based on the physical bond, often translated in on-stage gestures. Later, the character develops a kind of intellectualization of her role and attitude in the play.

I also want to argue that adaptation of the ancient models to the new audience could be labelled as a “returning interference”. In this interference, early Italian tragic models cooperate in adapting classical models to the target context. Italian tragedy in the 16th century is a form consisting of texts with a dense interdiscursive structure. It is composed of highly codified texts, which reproduce a sort of genre grammar involving the plot and the rhetorical composition. Despite the varying degrees of adherence to the models, the classical texts – the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides and those of Seneca – were the main benchmarks. Soon, however, the Italian tragedians also began to quote one another: the first tragedies became the reference point for the later works. Earlier Italian tragedians’ works, then, influenced the translations of the Greek classics. Early Italian tragedies functioned as a filter in the re-reading, translation, and adaptation, of ancient texts. A study on Italian Renaissance tragedy needs to consider this general framework, with all the complexities deriving from “the accumulation of super-significations, the interference of quotations, the incessant play of superimpositions, of memories, animating . . . a centrifugal movement that continuously complicates the structure of the tragedy” (Cremante 1988, 11).²

The classical models used for the nurses in Italian tragedy represent many kinds of relationships (male-female, or lovers, sister-sister, mother-daughter, nurse-milk-daughter). Due to the prestige of the reference texts, tradition has a modelling power. The models are those offered by tradition, and authors easily interpret the nurse-daughter relationship by applying the models of other relationships between women (mother-daughter, sisters) involving care, affection and bodily bonding. The way the playwright describes the bodily bond is a product of a male writers’ imagination: what models drive the representation of such a visceral relationship between two women? My last claim is that other types of relationships play a role in fashioning the bond, such as the relationship between sisters, Dido and Anna in the *Aeneid*, and between a mother and daughter, as in the case of Hecuba and Polyxena in Euripides’ *Hecuba*: the pair Hecuba-Polissena probably constituted a model for the physical representation of the mother (or nurse)-daughter pair. The use of ancient models overrides the consistency of the content choice of the model (the nurse is neither a sister nor a mother). There are elements, however, that function as a constant, allowing the transition from one figure to the other: nurturing (the sisters, of flesh or milk, were likely nourished together or from the same source); the availability of physical contact; and the profound bond that these two elements produce (e.g., expressed through the desire to die together). Another model, the heterosexual love bond, overlaps

² I use Cremante’s account of *Sophonisba* as a general description of the overall tradition of Renaissance Italian tragedy.

with the sisterly pair and the Nurse and milk-daughter pair. Textual expressions migrate from the general love context to the more specific context of the bond between women. This is another manifestation of the process of progressive shifts and adaptation from gestures and words borrowed from other relational contexts (as in the case of *Alcestis* and the *Inamoramento de Orlando* by Boiardo in *Sophonisba*, see below).

A couple of milk sisters, Sofonisba and Erminia in Trissino's *Sophonisba*, are at the start of our journey.

1. *Sophonisba* by Gian Giorgio Trissino

Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Sophonisba* is the first tragedy in the vernacular of explicit classical inspiration in early modern times.³ The author is counted among those labelled by Herrick "the Grecians" for their specific imitation of Greek models (Herrick 1965, 45); scholar, grammarian, critic, poet, dramatist and courtier, Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550) is one of the most notable intellectuals of the first half of the 16th century. *Sophonisba* was probably conceived under the influence of the group of the Orti Oricellari, who at the time were cultivating the study of ancient Greek and already dedicated to rediscovering ancient theatre (Pieri 1980, 96-7; Cosentino 2003, 63-71). It was composed in Rome in 1514-1515, offered to Leo X in 1518, circulated in manuscript and published in Rome in July 1524 (Cremante 1988, 3; Gallo 2019).

Sophonisba presents a pair of milk sisters who take on many traits that, in tradition, are those of the Nurse-milk daughter pair; the two characters will become a model of that relationship in later Italian tragedies. Very different classical and Romance models contribute to constructing the dialogue between the two women: the Dido and Anna couple in the *Aeneid*, the Admetus-Alcestis couple in Euripides' *Alcestis*, but also the Tisbina and Iroldo couple in Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Inamoramento de Orlando*. The words indicating physical contact function as stage directions, and the corporeal bond is crucial, particularly in the staged death of the main character Sofonisba.

Written in unrhymed hendecasyllables, *Sophonisba* recounts an event which occurred during the Second Punic War. The young protagonist who gives her name to the tragedy is the daughter of the Carthaginian Hasdrubal and wife of Siface, king of the Massesilians, allied with Carthage. After the capture of her husband in the clash with the Romans, she fears falling into the hands of the enemy. Massinissa, the Numidian king, her former

³ I quote from the selection of Italian tragedies edited by Renzo Cremante (Cremante 1988). I reproduce the text of Cremante's edition, Greek characters ε and ω excluded, which are in the original, and part of Trissino's proposal for spelling reform. Here and henceforth translations are mine.

betrothed, is in love with her. He tries to save her by proposing marriage. However, the Romans oppose the plan: Massinissa himself supplies Sofonisba with poison, with which she commits suicide.⁴

There is no specific nurse among the characters, but a milk sister and sister-in-law, Erminia. Nonetheless, the character of Erminia and her relationship with Sophonisba are crucial to the later development of the nurse character, for the following reasons: firstly, according to Cremante, Erminia is modelled on the Nurse of classical tragedy (Cremante 1988, 36). The dialogue between the protagonist and her sister allows the character to explain her reasons, as in the dialogue between Medea and the Nurse in Euripides' *Medea*, in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (176ff.), where the dialogue is placed at the beginning of the stage action, and in Seneca's *Phaedra* (84ff., after Hippolytus' monologue). Secondly, in Appian 8.28, one of Trissino's sources, Sofonisba takes the poison in the presence of the Nurse (Cremante 1988, 36). Thirdly, the milk bond between Erminia and Sofonisba becomes stronger and stronger in the course of the tragedy, since Sofonisba, before her death, will entrust her little son to her. Erminia becomes a sort of nurse: "Mi sforzerò di far ciò che volete, / per rimaner nutrice al vostro filjo / Et a la madre serva, non che nuora" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1827-9; "I will strive to do what you want, / to be a nurse to your child / and servant and daughter-in-law to your mother"); and Sofonisba: "In questo meço a l'unico mio filio, / vivendo tu, non mancherà la madre" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1797-8; "At this time my only son, while you live, will not lack a mother"). Sharing milk is the first physical element that Erminia and Sofonisba mention in the opening dialogue - "sian nutrite insieme" (Trissino, *Soph.* 14; "we were fed together"). Fourthly, the opening of *Sophonisba* will serve as a model for many later tragedies, in which Erminia's place will be taken by the Nurse: the Sofonisba-Erminia couple provides an early example of the language of relationship, care and support that would be imitated and further developed in the following years.

In Erminia's presence, Sofonisba needs to pour out her heart - "si sfuoga ragionando il cuore" (Trissino, *Soph.* 21; "speaking, the heart pours out"). The need to speak opens the prologue, which works as a threshold of the tragic action and a technical tool for reconstructing the events that will lead to the tragic event. Sofonisba's words insist on the semantic area of pain: "molesta" ("harasses"), "dolor" ("sorrow"), "martiri" ("torments"). They also focus on the need to externalize - "disfogare" ("to vent"), "manifestando" ("expressing"), "narrando" ("telling you") - what is inside "cuor" ("heart"), "ingombra" ("occupies") (Trissino, *Soph.* 1-7). Conversely, Erminia's words insist on their bonding, both on a level of disparity and equality - "Regina"

⁴ The sources of the storyline are Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 30, 12-15 and Appian 8.10-28 (Cremante 1988, 8; Cosentino 2003, 140).

(“Queen”), “amor” (“love”), “sorella” (“sister”); on feelings — “v’ami” (“I love you”), “si dolja . . . de i vostri mali” (Trissino, *Soph.* 8-12; “grieves for your misfortunes”; and again on the act of bringing forth — “sfogate” (“vent”), “parlar” (“speak”). The occasion for narrating the antecedent is rooted in the relationship between the two women: Sofonisba seeks an outlet, but at the same time, she is also looking for a way to tidy up well-known unhappy facts — “[martiri] i quali ad uno ad un voljo narrarti” (Trissino, *Soph.* 7; “torments that I want to narrate to you one by one”); because you love me, she tells her, I want to reason more extensively with you, I will repeat things you already know because by reasoning, one’s heart receives relief.

In analysing the scene of Sophonisba’s suicide onstage, scholars have discussed the similarity between Dido’s and Sofonisba’s characters (Ferroni 1980, 183-4, and Cosentino 2003, 141-2). Modelled on the Dido-Anna couple, the physical bond between the two women only returns at the moment of the protagonist’s death: in the dialogue, during her agony (Trissino, *Soph.* 1723-979), Erminia is experiencing the grief as a sister, but she also lingers over the depth and physicality of the love bond that unites her to the dying Sofonisba. Erminia declares that she wants to die — “voljo venir, voljo venir anch’io / a star con voi sotterra” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1727-8; “I want to come, I want to come and be buried with you”). Sofonisba recalls the love that binds her to all the women who now accompany her in death. The women in the chorus guarantee the lustral rite of tears and the care of memory — “ond’orneren la vostra sepoltura / de le lacrime nostre e de’ capelli” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1748-9; “we shall adorn your burial with our tears and our hair”).⁵ When Sofonisba entrusts Erminia with the care of her little son, the task takes on a political implication: “fia forse ristauro a la sua gente” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1800; “will perhaps be a chance of salvation for his people”). Erminia laments her sister with words similar to those used in Virgil — “Tosto m’havete, tosto abandonata!” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1910; “Quickly you have abandoned me!”); “Ben dovevate, ben chiamarmi alhora, / crudel, quando il venen vi fu recato / . . . che morte insieme / allor saremmo in un medesimo punto / e gite in compagnia ne l’altra vita” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1772-6; “You should well have called me then, cruel one, when the poison was brought to you . . . Then we would have died together at the exact moment and would have gone to the next life together”). Just like Anna, Erminia clasps Sofonisba to her breast at the last moment: “SOPHONISBA Accostatevi a me, voljo appoggiarmi, / ch’io mi sento mancare . . . HERMINIA Appoggiatevi sopra ’l mio petto” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1893-6; “SOPHONISBA Come near me, I want to lean on you, because I feel I

⁵ For the meaning of the hair on the tomb, Cremante recalls Eur. *El.* 448-52 and *Alc.* 101-3, Cremante 1988, 143.

am dying . . . HERMINIA Lean on my breast").⁶

Trissino also draws the words to describe affection and loss from an erotic context: in addition to the memory of Petrarch's *RVF* (which, however, is not a poetic model connected to a specific semantic area), the author also remembers the episode of Tisbina and Iroldo from Matteo Maria Boiardo's *In-amoramento de Orlando* (Cremante 1988, 143-4):

Dove è l'amor che me portavi, e dove
È quel che spesso soleva iurare:
Che se tu avesti un ciel, o tuti nove,
Non vi potresti me senza habitare ?
Hor te pensi de andar nelo Inferno,
E me lasciar in terra in pianto eterno?
(Boiardo, *InOr* I 12 53, 3-8)

[Where is that love you had, and where / is that which made you often swear / if you ruled one, or all nine spheres, you could not live without me there? Do you plan to go to hell / and leave me to lament eternally on earth? (Boiardo 2004)]

With similar words, Erminia asks Sofonisba:

Crudele, hor non sapete il nostro amore,
E quante volte anchor m'havete detto
Che se voi su nel ciel fossi Regina,
Il starvi senza me vi saria noja?
Hor vi pensate andare ad altra vita
E me lasciare in un continuo pianto!
(Trissino, *Soph.* 1764-9)

[Cruel one, you do not know our love, and how many times you have told me again that if you were Queen up in heaven, to be without me would be a grief to you? Now do you think of going to another life leaving me in a continuous weeping!]

The Euripides' Admetus-Alcestis dialogue is working underneath the Italian

⁶ Anna reproaches Dido for having abandoned her ("quid primum deserta quaer-ar?" *Aen.* 4.677) and for not choosing her as a companion in death ("comitemne sororem / sprevisti moriens?", *Aen.* 4.677-8): had she done so, the same pain at the same time would have torn them both from life ("idem ambas ferro dolor atque eadem hora tulisset", *Aen.* 4.679); yet, by killing herself, Anna tells her, Dido has also brought death to her sister ("Extinxti te meque, soror", *Aen.* 4.682). After washing the wounds, Anna focuses on Dido's mouth: she wants to catch with her lips one last breath of life ("extremus si quis super halitus errat / ore legam", *Aen.* 4.684-5). While uttering words of sorrow she clasps her sister to her breast ("semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat / cum gemitu", *Aen.* 4.686-7).

text, as well. The author interweaves the words of Tisbina with Admetus's words on the dying Alcestis, especially in the lines where Erminia imagines her life without Sofonisba. Erminia will speak with the shadow of Sophonisba (Trissino, *Soph.* 1835-8, Eur. *Alc.* 348-54). In *Alcestis*, Admetus fantasizes about embracing the statue of his wife on the nuptial bed; in both texts, it is "freddo conforto" (Trissino, *Sophon.* 1838) and "ψυχρὰν . . . τέρπσιν" (Eur. *Alc.* 353; "chill delight", Euripides 1988, 91]; Erminia hopes Sofonisba will visit her in dreams, to console her: "Ch'elj'è piacere assai vedere in sogno / Cosa che s'ami e che ci sia negata" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1842-33; "it is a great pleasure to see in a dream something we love and that is denied to us"). Admetus also wished to see Alcestis in a dream for the same reason: "ἡδὺ γάρ φίλους κὰν νυκτὶ λεύσσειν, ὄντιν' ἄν παρῆι χρόνον" (Eur. *Alc.* 355-6; "for sweet it is, by night, to look on loved ones, for as long as they may stay", Euripides 1988, 93). The erotic semantics is toned down but it still remains explicit. Erminia speaks of "nostro amore" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1764; "our love"), the beloved who took the poison only for herself is "crucele" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1773; "cruel"). She recalls when her friend told her that even if she had been Queen in heaven, it would have been painful for her to give up Erminia's company (Trissino, *Soph.* 1765-7). Within this staged death, the representation of the affection between two milk-sisters amplifies the suffering and elicits the emotional involvement of the audience; the author describes the affection between the two women with the tools provided by literary tradition in expressing love between a man and a woman. A few more examples: to seal her persuasive speech to Sofonisba so that she won't kill herself, Erminia says: "Perché, vivendo tu, non moro in tutto, / Anzi vive di me l'ottima parte (Trissino, *Soph.* 1817-18; "Because, if you live, I will not entirely die, / Indeed, the best part of me will live"); the line is taken from Petrarch *RVF* CCCXXXI 43-5, but the meaning is reversed: "Bello et dolce morire era allor quando, / morend'io, non moria mia vita in seme / anzi vivea di me l'optima parte" (Petrarch 2001; "How nice and sweet if I had died then; when dying my life would not have died with me - rather, the best of me would have lived on"). Again, Sofonisba's words: "Herminia mia, tu sola a questo tempo / Mi sei padre, fratel, sorella e madre" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1875-6; "My Herminia, only you now / are my father, brother, sister and mother"), are the words of Andromache to Hector (4.429-30), the words of a woman to a man.

These words indicating physical contact function as stage directions for the gestures of the two characters and they occur only at the moment of death: "Appoggiatevi pur sopra 'l mio petto" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1896; "Lean on my breast") Erminia says to Sophonisba, at the last moment and "alzate il viso a questo che vi baccia" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1902; "lift your face to this one who kisses you"). Erminia's pain is in her body: "corpo, a che non ti schiantiti?" (Trissino, *Soph.* 1956; "body, why don't you crash?"); "Ma son di carne,

e s'io fosse anco pietra, / penso che sentirei questo dolore” (Trissino, *Soph.* 1972-3; “But I am of flesh, and if I were of stone, I think I would feel this pain”).

The relationship between two women described and employed in the *Sophonisba* will become an essential model in the representation of the bond between Nurse and milk-daughter and will be amplified by the interference from other sources. Later tragedies will also deepen the representation on stage, in words and gestures, of the profound symbolic meaning of the bodily bond linking Nurse and milk daughter.

2. *Rosmunda* by Giovanni Rucellai

Probably completed in 1516, *Rosmunda* by Giovanni Rucellai (1475-1543) was performed in the Orti Oricellari while Pope Leo X was in Florence (Simonetta 2017). It shares the metrical and significant structural innovations of the *Sophonisba*. Trissino and Rucellai probably collaborated on composing it (Herrick 1965, 57 calls Rucellai a “friendly rival of Trissino”; Ferroni 1980, 167-8, Cremante 1988, 165-6). This collaboration helped to create the rhetorical fabric of locutions, stylistic elements, quotations, and intertextual allusions characteristic of 16th-century vernacular tragedy. *Sophonisba* gradually became a recognised model for later tragedians, perceived at the same level of the classics (Cremante 1988, 167).

In *Rosmunda*, the Nurse has a counter-singing role that enacts a second diegetic line which contrasts with the one proposed by the tragic character Rosmunda: where Rosmunda is led by the reasons of her heart, first to give her father a proper burial and then to kill herself, the Nurse leads her, instead, towards life, the resolution of a political problem and revenge. In this conflictual relationship between the Nurse and the milk daughter, the latter mentions the profound and visceral bond with the Nurse. She activates a mechanism that will also be found in Giraldi Cinzio's *Orbecche* and *Canace*: the contrastive overlapping of the two timelines of present and past, of the care given to the newborn and that given to the corpse after death (in this case only imagined). The antagonistic construction of the Nurse's character makes it possible to stage a tragic character within a work with a happy ending.

A popular Longobard legend (appearing in many other texts, from Paolo Diacono's *Historia longobardorum* to the novellas of Matteo Bandello) provided the storyline. Treated freely by the author (Cremante 1988, 171), the story tells of Rosmunda, daughter of the Gepid king Cunimondo, whose father was killed in a clash with the Longobard troops of King Alboin. While burying her father, Rosmunda is taken prisoner and then persuaded by her

nurse to accept Alboin's marriage proposal. In doing so, she has to face the brutality of the king, who forces her to drink from her father's skull during the wedding feast. She faints on stage. In the meantime, the nurse makes Almachilde (Rosmunda's former betrothed) dress up as a woman and enter Alboin's chamber to behead him. The nurse personally lays the revenge plot, like the servant character in the comedies. This innovative role of the nurse is a distinctive feature of this drama (see also Cosentino 2003, 146-7).

In the first scene, Rosmunda and the Nurse are on the battlefield, where the Longobards have just defeated the Gepids. Rosmunda's words open the nocturnal conversation, consistent with the solemn service she is about to perform: the burial to the body of her father who fell in battle.

Tempo è ormai, or che 'l profondo sonno,
 Vestitosi el sembiante de la morte,
 Di quiete e silenzio el mondo ingombra,
 Sciogliendo con dolcissimo riposo
 Dalle fatiche e da' pensier del giorno
 Ogni omo, ogni animal mite e selvaggio.
 (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 1-6)

[The time has come, now that deep sleep, / Clothed in the appearance of death, / Clothes the world in stillness and silence, / Dissolving with sweetest repose / Every man, every meek and wild animal / From the toils and thoughts of the day.]⁷

If the victorious enemies are experiencing a natural sleep, the bodies of those fallen in battle and cluttering up the field are in a very different rest, that of a non-metaphorical death. The juxtaposition of sleep and death amplifies the memory of *Aeneid* 4.522-8. As in Apollonius of Rhodes (*Apollonius Arg.* 3.744-50), the context in the *Aeneid* is erotic: in both texts, two women, respectively Medea and Dido, are unable to sleep when everyone is asleep, thinking of their beloved. On the other hand, in *Rosmunda*, Rosmunda wakes up driven by filial love to carry out her macabre task (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 15; "officio extremo"): for three nights in a row Rosmunda has been turning over the dead one by one, searching for her father's body (on the similarities between Rosmunda and Antigone, see Pieri 1980, 99-100).

Rosmunda urges the nurse to her task, calling her "nutrice e madre" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 9; "nurse and mother") "infirmia e vecchia" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 14; "infirm and old"). The Nurse has a guiding, rather than supporting, role, since she is the bearer of a different value system. Rosmunda understands the Nurse's arguments and submits to them; at the same time, idealistic reasons lead her to expose herself to danger or make her fantasize about suicide.

⁷ All quotations are from Cremante 1988. All translations are mine.

This setup prevents the expression of the emotional bond in the dialogues. The Nurse's concern for Rosmunda's safety is based on political considerations (Pieri 1980, 100 calls it "practical wisdom"). The Nurse is clear about the significance and value of Rosmunda's body on the political stage: the queen is "unica speme al nostro regno" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 16; "only hope for our kingdom"). She is a "fanciulla adorna e bella" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 21; "elegant and beautiful maiden"), in the prime of her life. For this reason, she is a tempting prey for enemies who might rape or kill her "per estinguer la tua famosa stirpe, / che ancora ne la tua vita si riserba" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 29-30; "to extinguish your illustrious lineage that is still preserved in your being alive"). For the Nurse, Rosmunda's body has a particular value since the lineage proceeds through her. She urges her to flee and find allies to avenge her father rather than continue trying to bury him: for her father's shadow, she says, it is not so much important to be buried as to be avenged. In the Nurse's speeches there is a reflection on political conduct, on the contrast between ideal and concrete, politically compelling motivations, which have prompted some scholars to talk of Rosmunda's 'protomachiavellism'.⁸

The only moment in the relationship between Rosmunda and the Nurse that is more physical coincides with the tragic climax of the play, just before Rosmunda faints (shortly before, she was forced to drink from her father's skull during the wedding banquet). At this point, Rosmunda becomes a tragic heroine. She challenges the Nurse and gives vent to her anguish and rage at the offence she has received from the tyrant. She addresses the Nurse thus: "tu che col tuo seno mi nutristi" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 1048; "you who with your breast fed me") recalling the moment when she came out of her mother's unhappy womb. Rosmunda says to the Nurse: "da' sepulcro a chi già desti el lacte" (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 1052; "bury the one to whom you already gave milk"). Rosmunda's words overlap two temporal lines, present and past. As in later Italian tragedies, e.g., in Giraldi Cinzio's *Orbecche*, when the daughter's life is in danger, the memory of the past relationship, when the daughter was a breast-fed baby, and the fear of death appears in their discourse, along with the fantasy about the destiny of the body after life. The present is tragic, while the memory of the past recalls care and initiation into life. In the present, Rosmunda is expecting to die and will need burial, whereas in the past the focus was on the Nurse's loving care for the new-born child. Breastfeeding and burial, origin and end: the Nurse's breast and hands are meant to manage both life and death.

In the tragedy, Rosmunda fails to die: she invokes death but faints on

⁸ Bruscaagli 2011 uses the label referring to the character of Alboino. I think Rosmunda's Nurse is another example, perhaps a more interesting one because it allows comparison of Sofonisba's and Rosmunda-Nurse's motivations for action.

stage shortly before Almachilde's arrival. The apparent death constitutes the possible tragic ending, the one that the character of Rosmunda (following in the footsteps of Trissino's *Sophonisba*) had set and desired from the beginning. The winning course of action, however, is not tragic: through the intervention of the nurse, Almachilde kills the tyrant Alboin.

To emphasise the life/death contrast and the nurturing role of the nurse, the tragedy is constructed as a circle: at the beginning of the play Rosmunda is searching for the body of her father killed in battle, to give him burial; at the end, when shattered by grief, she asks for her own burial, and for her ashes to be collected in her father's skull "acciò che in quel medesimo loco / Abbin lor fine unde ebbon nascimento" (1058-9; "so that in that same place they may have their end where they were born").

Rosmunda, then, reverses the tragic message of *Sophonisba*. The hunted queen chooses death as an absolute value, a radical gesture of freedom; Rosmunda would like to do the same: faced with the tyrant's cruelty, she would like to break loose by committing suicide. However, the Nurse's intervention prevents her. The Nurse takes on the central role to provide contact with the concrete and rational aspects of life. Significantly, the tragic character Rosmunda mentions the corporeal bond with the Nurse: only the entirely tragic dimension seems to leave symbolic space to elaborate on the affective and existential meaning of such bond.

3. *Orbecche* by Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio

In five acts, performed in 1541 in the author's house in the presence of the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole II, and printed in 1543, *Orbecche* by Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio (1504-1573) was conceived in Ferrara, a few decades later than *Sophonisba* and *Rosmunda* (Cremante 1988, 263-4; Foà 2001). In this tragedy the physical relationship between the Nurse and the milk-daughter is most impressive.

Orbecche reaches the highest degree of physical involvement in the relationship between the Nurse and the milk daughter to activate the audience's empathy, particularly the female audience. In the description of the death of the protagonist on stage, the memory of Virgil's Dido and Sofonisba is present. The exceptional involvement of the body deepens the mechanism of the contrastive overlapping of the two timelines already seen in *Rosmunda*. At the same time, however, the Nurse who can console and grieves for her daughter's death is also particularly unable to empathise with the fears expressed by *Orbecche* as the tragedy unfolds. The tragic character stands alone in facing grief and death, and the function of the Nurse remains that of reacting to what is an unexpected turn of events for her.

Orbecche originated under the banner of formal experimentalism: the author himself acknowledges the work's innovation due to the need to adapt the tragic genre to contemporary times, leaving Tragedy itself to speak at the end of the play:

. . . senza alcun biasimo lece
Che da nova materia e novi nomi
Nasca nova Tragedia.
. . . che ben pazzo fora
Colui il qual, per non por cosa in uso
Che non fosse in costume appo gli antichi,
Lasciasse quel che 'l loco e 'l tempo chiede
Senza disnor. E s'io non sono in tutto
Simile a quelle antiche, è ch'io son nata
Testé da padre giovane e non posso
Comparir se non giovane; ma forse
Potrà levare il dispiacer ch'avrai
Del mio grave dolor, la verde etade.
(Giraldi, *Orb.* 3174-90)

[. . . without any blame, it is allowed that from new matter and new names a new tragedy is born. . . . because he would be a fool who would leave out what time and place require without dishonour, just so as not to put something into use that was not in the custom of the ancients. And if I am not in all things like the ancients, it is because I was born now of a young father and cannot appear but young; but perhaps green age may remove the sorrow of my grievous suffering.]⁹

Giraldi argued for the effectiveness of tragedy as an instrument of learning and a form of entertainment, despite the sorrowful subject matter of the play:

la Tragedia ha anco il suo diletto et in quel pianto si scuopre un nascoso piacere, che il fa dilettevole a chi l'ascolta et tragge gli animi alla attentione et gli empie di meraviglia; la quale gli fa bramosi di apparare col mezzo dell'horrore et della compassione quello che non fanno, cio è di fuggire il vitio et di seguir la virtù, oltre che la conformità c'ha l'essere humano col lagrimevole, gli induce a mirar voluntieri quello spettacolo che ci dà inditio della natura nostra, et fa che l'umanità che è in noi ci dà ampia materia di haver compassione alle miserie degli afflitti.
(Giraldi Cinzio 2002, 223-4)

[Tragedy also has its delight, and in that weeping, a hidden pleasure is discovered, which makes it delightful to those who listen to it, draws their minds

⁹ All quotations are from Cremante 1988. All translations are mine.

to attention, and fills them with wonder; which makes them eager to learn through horror and compassion what they do not do, that is, to flee from evil and to follow virtue, as well as the correspondence of the human being with the mournful, induces them to willingly look at that spectacle that gives us an indication of our nature, and makes the humanity that is in us give us ample opportunity to have compassion for the wretchedness of the afflicted.]

Pleasure and learning pass through compassion. There is a quotation here, probably from the first words of Boccaccio's *Decameron*: "Umana cosa è avere compassione degli afflitti" ("To take pity on people in distress is a human quality"), and the author takes particular care to amplify the effect and pathetic outcome of the tragic scenes. In *Orbecche* the Nurse has precisely this function: she is a 'low' character, and her low status makes her unsuitable, in Giraldi's opinion, for a leading tragic role (Giraldi criticised Speroni's *Canace* precisely for having the Nurse die, Brusca 1983, 131); at the same time, her character is fundamental on stage precisely because it activates identification and emotional participation. As we shall see, representing physical relations (probably through gestures of affection on stage) is the primary tool for achieving this effect. The prologue of *Orbecche* opens with the word "wonder" ("Essere non vi dee di maraviglia", Giraldi, *Orb.* 1) and gives special prominence to the female audience, who should be the first to leave the hall to keep away from the painful scenes contained in the tragedy:

Oimè, come potran le menti vostre
 Di pietà piene e d'amorosi affetti,
 E sovra tutti di voi, donne, avezze
 Ne' giochi, ne' dilette e ne' solazzi
 E di natura dolci e delicate,
 Non sentir aspra angoscia, a udir sì strani
 Infortunii, sì gravi e sì crudeli,
 Quai sono quei che deono avvenire oggi?
 Come potranno i vostri occhi, lucenti
 Più che raggi del sol, veder tai casi
 E così miserabili e sì tristi
 L'un sovra l'altro, e rattenere il pianto?
 (Giraldi, *Orb.* 37-48)

[Alas, how can your minds full of pity and loving affection, and especially you, women, accustomed to games, pleasures and amusements, and by nature sweet and delicate, not feel bitter anguish at hearing such strange, grave and cruel misfortunes as those that are to come today? How can your eyes, shining brighter than the sun's rays, see such miserable and sad cases one upon another, and hold back tears?]

The audience of the tragedy "scuopre un nascoso piacere" ("discover a hid-

den pleasure”) in grieving; that’s why, in the words of Tragedy, the female audience appears to be the privileged vehicle of circulating emotions. Giral-di indirectly dedicates a tragedy with a female protagonist to women: the women “di natura dolci e delicate” bring to mind the dedicatees of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in the “Prologo”, “dlicate donne” who have “dlicati petti” (Boccaccio 1995, 68; “fragile breasts”). According to Franca Angelini, “theoretical accommodations always come after an experiment that has already been performed. Therefore, it occurs in reference to a practice of both writing and representation” (Angelini 1986, 84). The author can argue for the efficacy of tragedy and the role of the feminine as a vehicle of emotions, on the ground of his own experience and observation.

The story told in *Orbecche* concerns the daughter of Sulmone, king of Persia, Orbecche, who has secretly married Oronte, an officer of her father’s, and had two children by him. When the father discovers the marriage, he kills the husband and the children by a trick and offers the remains to the young bride as a wedding gift. She, in turn, kills her father and then takes her own life.

The dialogue between Orbecche and the Nurse opens the second act, the actual beginning of the stage action (in Senecan style, the first act is entrusted to the voices of Nemesis, the Fury, and the shadow of Selina, Sulmone’s wife, who narrate the antecedent). Trissino’s *Sophonisba* offers a model for the dialogue: the maiden complains of a terrible worry, which causes her to lament the instability of fortune and how “vicin al riso è sempre il pianto” (Giraldi, *Orb.* 385; “close to joy there is always weeping”). The Nurse urges her to reveal what is troubling her: the lamentations pierce her heart (Giraldi, *Orb.* 409) and make her “tremar . . . insino a l’ossa” (Giraldi, *Orb.* 415; “tremble . . . to the bone”). The maiden decides to speak:

Non perch’io spero al mio languir rimedio,
Ma perché il core pur respira alquanto
Ne l’isfogar le gravi angoscie interne,
Dirotti la cagion del mio gran male.
(Giraldi, *Orb.* 419-22)

[Not because I hope to have a remedy for my grieving but because my heart breathes a little in venting the grave internal anguish, I will tell you the cause of my great sorrow.]

The heart “breathes” like a living body, and the internal space of manifestation of pain is a pulsating cavity in the personification of the heart. ‘Venting’ the heart in front of the Nurse brings relief and justifies the narration of the previous events. Orbecche’s father proposes that his daughter should get married for political and dynastic reasons. He explains the need for Or-

becche to marry “poi che piacque al re del cielo / in te sola serbare il seme nostro” (Giraldi, *Orb.* 440-1; “since it pleased the King of Heaven in you alone to hold our seed”). Orbecche, like Rosmunda, has value in part because of her procreative capacity.

Orbecche’s Nurse draws her reflections on the instability of fortune and the misery of the human condition from the Senecan nurses; the thoughtful attitude, however, leaves room for the expression of compassion towards Orbecche:

Ver è ben che mi duole insin al core
 Vederla così afflitta e così trista.
 E s’io potessi in me coglier gli affanni
 Che la trafigon così fieramente,
 Ella scarca saria già d’ogni doglia.
 (Giraldi, *Orb.* 648-52)

[It indeed pains me in my heart to see her so afflicted and so sad. And if I could gather the afflictions that pierce her with such force, she would already be discharged of all grief.]

The Nurse imagines herself as a sort of vessel that can collect all the afflictions of the girl, who would find herself “scarca” ‘drained’ of them: moral support takes the form of a physical ‘transfer’ of the afflictions. At the moment of the dream’s narration, when all but Orbecche believe in Sulmone’s forgiveness and a happy ending, the Nurse does not believe in the ominous omens but pronounces words filled with practical common sense: “Ditemi, che volete altro sognarvi / Ch’affanno e morti, se ’n affanni sempre / Vi state e v’opponete al piacer vostro?” (Giraldi, *Orb.* 2669-71; “Tell me, what else do you want to dream but toil and death, if you are always in affliction and oppose your pleasure?”), as if to say it is the bad thoughts of the day that create the dreams of the night: “Fate allegro viso!” (Giraldi, *Orb.* 2708; “be cheerful!”), she exhorts her, just before discovering the horror of the misdeed upon meeting Oronte. The cheerful countenance contrasts with what is to come: first, the discovery, then the killing and decapitation of Sulmone by Orbecche, who cuts off his head and hands, using the same knives that had killed her sons: Sulmone himself offers Orbecche the instruments of death, which are still piercing the corpses of her children. Finally, Orbecche turns the weapons against herself. The killing and decapitation of Oronte take place offstage and are narrated by a witness, whereas Orbecche’s suicide takes place before the eyes of the Nurse and of the audience: a mediation between Horatian dictates, Aristotelian views and the practice of Seneca (Colombo 2007).

In the relationship between the Nurse and the milk daughter, the body

is mainly involved in the Nurse's words of lament when she clutches Orbecche's lifeless body to her chest. As in *Rosmunda*, the Nurse's memory becomes the space of conjunction and contrast between the past (the tender and happy breastfeeding of the new-born) and the present dominated by death. The bodies are the same, as is the gesture of holding her daughter's body in her arms (in a sort of *Pietà*), except that she has just pierced her heart. Like Erminia in *Sophonisba*, Orbecche's Nurse reproaches her daughter for wanting to die without her: "E perché non chiamaste anco con voi / Questa infelice vecchia a morir vosco" (Giraldi, *Orb.* 3055-6; "And why did you not call this unhappy old woman to die with you") so that nobody can say "Orbecche è morta e la Nodrice è viva?" (Giraldi, *Orb.* 3058; "Orbecche is dead and the Nurse is alive?"). In *Sophonisba* the lines are: "Perché non voljo mai che s'oda dire: / Herminia è viva senza Sophonisba" (*Trissino, Soph.* 1779-80; "For I never want it to be said: / Herminia is alive without Sophonisba"). But *Orbecche* goes further, working on the contrast between past and present. In the Nurse's role, physical contact is not only functional (give burial to the one to whom you gave milk); physical contact carries the memory of the past relationship. The Nurse holds Orbecche's corpse, contemplates her facial features and her lips, and feels her weight on her arms; the words materialize into gestures as they invoke her eyes, her lips and the weight of her body:

O Signora, o Reina amata e cara,
 Alzate gli occhi a la Nodrice vostra
 E vedete il suo pianto; e a le parole
 Risponda questa bocca da la quale
 Uscian sì dolci e sì soavi accenti
 Che potean di dolcezza ogni gran pianto
 Condire, oimè!

...

O dolci e care labbra,
 O labbra amate,
 Che con tanta mia gioia già succiaste
 Le poppe mie, com'or vi veggio essangui!

...

Peso già a me via più d'ogn'altro dolce,
 Com'or mi sei via più d'ogn'altro amaro!
 (Giraldi, *Orb.* 3085-91; 3095-8; 3112-3)

[Oh Lady, Oh beloved and dear Queen, lift your eyes to your Nurse and see her weeping; and respond to the words with this mouth from which such sweet and gentle sounds came forth, sounds that could flavour every great weeping with sweetness, oh alas! . . . Oh sweet and dear lips, Oh beloved lips, that with such joy did you already suck my breasts, how pale I see you now!

. . . Weight already sweet to me far more than any other, how bitter you are to me now, far more than any other!]

The Nurse names the parts of Orbecche's body that best represent their mutual bond based on the correspondence between the two women's bodies: between Orbecche's eyes and the weeping eyes of the Nurse; between the Nurse's words and the memory of the sweet accents of the new-born; between Orbecche's lips and the breasts (note the functional precision: the "poppe" are precisely the breasts that suckle). Emotions, especially joy, are connected to breastfeeding, and the once sweet weight of the milk-daughter now corresponds to the weight of her corpse. In this entirely physical dimension, one experiences the overlapping of two temporal planes. In the present time, the Nurse perceives the memory of the past relationship in contrast with sensations aroused by the current situation: baby's wails vs the silence of death, lips sucking milk vs bloodless lips. In this representation, the Nurse's physical relationship with the milk daughter reaches its highest expression.¹⁰

Orbecche is the only character in the tragedy who foretells the truth: the nurse's words are not enough to reassure her about her father's good intentions. The young woman viscerally knows that something unspeakable is brewing. This capacity for profound contact with the irrational (the dream, the baleful omen) is the character's hallmark and facilitates the bodily expression of emotions. The nurse takes charge of this aspect, from the beginning of the tragedy until its gory conclusion, from milk to blood.

4. *Canace* by Sperone Speroni

Canace by Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) was composed in 1541, read at the Accademia degl'Infiammati, and published in 1546 without the author's consent (Piantoni 2018). It is composed in short verses, mainly septenaries, and

¹⁰ The model of Anna rescuing her sister Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* is here amplified: after washing the wounds, Anna focuses on Dido's mouth: she wants to catch with her lips one last breath of life ("extremus si quis super halitus errat / ore legam", *Aen.* 4.684-5). While uttering words of sorrow she clasps her sister to her breast ("semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat / cum gemitu", *Aen.* 4.686-7); in *Didone*, a tragedy drawn from Virgil's *Aeneid* Book 4, Giraldo Cinzio amplifies the scene of Anna's grief over Dido's body using features borrowed from his *Orbecche*: Dido's death happens almost entirely offstage: she is carried onto the stage at the very moment of her passing, and Anna's mourning concentrates on the lips, (Giraldo Cinzio 1583, 125-6; "Ahi, bocca cara, / bocca già di rubin via più vermiglia, / or pallida via più, che non è il busso, / manda a mia contentezza una parola"; "Alas, dear mouth, mouth once redder than ruby, now paler than boxwood, send a word to my contentment").

represents an alternative to the novelties of Giraldi's theatre.

Canace is a sort of starting point of the process leading to the intellectualisation of the Nurse. She can assist her milk daughter in childbirth and in the attempt to save her and the newborn child. However, the description of the physical relationship linked with nourishment is shifted exclusively to the dying mother's words to her child. In addition, the Nurse takes a critical stance towards the court and illustrates the reasons for her detachment. As a subordinate, she is stuck in a stalemate in which both obeying and disobeying constitute a danger. Indeed, she will be killed for her attempt to help her milk daughter.

The plot is drawn from Ovid (Ovid, *Her.* 11): Canace, daughter of Aeolus and Deiopeia, has an incestuous relationship with her twin brother Macareus. A child is born of the union, which is immediately discovered: Aeolus reacts by sending a sword and poison to kill his daughter and her Nurse, respectively (the punishment is modelled on Boccaccio's *Dec.* 5.7, Cremante 1986, 452), and the child's body thrown to the dogs; Macareus kills himself and Aeolus eventually repents (like Creon in *Antigone*, Cremante 1986, 452). In *Canace*, the Nurse plays a particularly active role in the development of the plot: thanks to her, Canace's pregnancy remains concealed; she supports Canace in labour and organises a plan to remove the baby from the court.

When the royal parents discover the child, the Nurse is punished together with the girl. According to the Ovidian source, she is the first to realise that Canace is in love (Ovid, *Her.* 11.34), and tries to procure her an abortion (Ovid, *Her.* 11.39-42); at the moment of childbirth, she presses her hand on Canace's mouth to prevent her from crying (Ovid, *Her.* 11, 49-52). In *Canace*, however, the Nurse does not fully adhere to her role, as we have seen in the previous examples: in her first monologue, she curses the fate that, after the death of her husband and son, prompted her parents to send her into the service of the royal household

Dalla pace alla guerra,
 Dal riposo agli affanni,
 Dal sicuro del porto
 A' sospetti dell' onde,
 Da una vita innocente
 Alla infamia, alla pena
 Degli altrui mancamenti,
 Fui per sempre una volta
 Senza mia colpa tolta.
 (Speroni, *Can.* 718-26)¹¹

¹¹ All quotations are from Cremante 1988.

[From peace to war, from rest to affliction, from safe harbour to perilous waves, from an innocent life to infamy, to the punishment of others' failings, I was once forever taken away through no fault of my own.]

The soliloquy contains a generic criticism of life in the courts, which is corrupt and dangerous, but also accounts for the inner situation of the Nurse, torn between dissent and love, fear and loyalty. The poor servant's life is double-edged:

Lo star fermo, il fuggire,
 La difesa, l'offesa,
 Il parlare, il tacere,
 Lo scoprire, il coprire,
 È una istessa rovina.
 (Speroni, *Can.* 748-52)

[Standing still, fleeing, defending, offending, speaking, keeping silent, revealing, concealing, procure the same ruin.]

In the first dialogue between Canace and the Nurse, the young girl, in the throes of labour pains, wishes to die. The Nurse, however, in addition to defending her milk daughter's life, according to her duty, well understands that if Canace lives, her honour is also safe. If she dies, the reasons that led her to commit suicide would quickly come to light. The preservation of Canace's honour is only possible if the incest and its fruit remain secret, and the Nurse is working to obtain this result, for Canace's sake but also for herself:

Io per molte paure,
 Per diversi perigli,
 Non pur tuoi, ma miei,
 Lungamente ho condotto
 La tua vita e il tuo onore
 Verso la sua salute.
 (Speroni, *Can.* 925-30)

[Through many fears, through many perils, not yours but mine, I have long led your life and honour to salvation.]

The Nurse also runs dangers in this situation: managing her milk daughter's body by guiding and protecting it is still a Nurse's responsibility in adult life on matters such as sexuality and procreation: a young girl is not entitled to act independently, especially if incest is at stake.

Although the nurse and the milk daughter are united in destiny, their words do not point to their bodily bond. Being in charge of managing the consequences of Canace's illicit love, the Nurse is more oriented towards acting rather than consoling, while Canace exhibits a physical relationship

with the infant with strategies similar to those already enacted in *Orbecche*. Having just given birth to a child, the young girl connects within herself the role of mother, nurse and heroine doomed to death. In addressing her baby as in *Heroides*, 111-20 (but the archetype is also Andromache speaking to her son in Euripides' *Trojan Women* 740-79), she mentions milk and blood, again with a contrasting effect, not between the present and the past (as in *Rosmunda* and *Orbecche*), but between the two different issues of her breast: it is not milk that will nourish the new-born, but the blood of the mother who is about to stab herself.

. . . baciando il volto
Del figliuolo innocente:
Questo, disse, è quel latte
Che ti pò dare il petto
Di tua madre infelice, e trappassata
Del pugnol di suo padre,
Ogni cosa lavando del suo sangue,
Finì sua vita.
(Speroni, *Can.* 1799-806)

[Kissing the innocent son's face: "This" she said "is the milk that your unhappy mother's breast can give you", and pierced by her father's dagger, everything washed with her blood, she ended her life and I for pity's sake remained dead and exsanguinated.]

Then, in the face of death, the emotional, bodily relationship between the two women, or between a woman and her child, takes on similar connotations. The similarities surface when the lament over death is uttered by a milk daughter or by a nurse, whether it is the mother who says goodbye to the child with the view that one of them is doomed to die.

5. Some Comments on Aretino's *Orazia* and Dolce's *Marianna*

In the following Italian tragic tradition, the Nurse's character stabilises into a model with more intellectual functions, providing guidance, moral support, and wise counselling. At the same time, the reference to the body tends to disappear from the dialogue. In Pietro Aretino's *Orazia* (1546), the Nurse has given "milk" and "doctrine" to the milk daughter. The female protagonist Celia addresses her as "madre" (Aretino, *Or.* 456; "mother"), or "saputa mia nutrice, ottima donna" (Aretino, *Or.* 505; "wise my Nurse, excellent woman")¹². However, even in Celia's death at her brother's hand, the Nurse

¹² All quotations from Aretino's *Orazia* and Dolce's *Marianna* are from Cremante 1988.

does not intervene: together with the handmaid, who acts as narrator, she witnesses the scene. Even if the nurse comments “anch’io voglio i dì miei finir co i suoi” (Aretino, *Or.* 1570; “I too want my days to end with hers”), she does not follow up on her words. Instead, she becomes the narrator of the handmaid’s death (hanged with a rope made from her plaits, “per l’amore / ch’ella portava ismesurato a Clelia”; Aretino, *Or.* 2350-1; “for the boundless love she bore to Clelia”).

Similar but more interesting is the case of Ludovico Dolce’s *Marianna* (1565), in which Nurse Berenice declares it impossible to outlive her lady, after the example of *Sophonisba*’s Erminia (Trissino, *Soph.* 1779-80): “Non sarà giamai che senza te, che come figlia amai, / restare un giorno in vita”, (Dolce, *Mar.* 2892-4; “It will never happen that without you, whom I loved as a daughter, I will remain one day alive”); the fantasy, which had been Rosmunda’s (Rucellai, *Rosm.* 1045-7), of mixing her own ashes with those of her father who gave her life, is transferred to the Nurse’s fantasy of dying with her lady and being buried in the same urn:

. . . si come io teco vissi
 Sempre, dal giorno ch’io
 Fanciulletta ti diedi il latte primo,
 Così una sepoltura
 Ambe noi rinchiudesse;
 E ’nsieme con la tua si mescolasse
 La mia cenere ancora.
 Che, se bene è diverso
 Tra noi lo stato, però che tu forse
 Reina, io sono ancella,
 Eguale fu tra noi sempre l’amore:
 E come questo mi te fe’ figliuola,
 Tu m’avessi per madre!
 (Dolce, *Mar.* 2896-908)

[. . . just as I have always lived with you, from the day I gave my first milk to you as a little girl, so let us both be buried together in one burial. Let my ashes be mingled with yours, for although our condition is different, though you were a queen and I a maid, the love between us was always the same: and as this has made you a daughter to me, may you also consider me a mother!]

Lactation, the transference of milk from one body to another, allows for similarity: we were ‘mixed’ when you were a child – the Nurse might say – in the same way we can now mix our ashes. The relationship between bodies allows for social levelling, in the name of motherly love.

Conclusion

The model of the Nurse gets its form during the first decades of Italian tragic production, in a sort of laboratory where authors dealt with the heroine's character (Cosentino 2006). Later, it is replaced by a more intellectual, collateral, philosophical nurse. Tasso's *Torrismondo's* Nurse, who knows what the protagonist Alvida will gradually discover, uses her function as a counter-singer to prevent or slow down the course of events: but her action does not go beyond reacting to the milk daughter's words and reasoning. Her space of autonomy, one might say, is considerably reduced.

The physical link between Nurse and milk daughter is most evident when the relationship between the two women is primarily affective. On the other hand, when the Nurse enters the scene with an active role, the representation of the body (being a 'nurse') disappears in their discourse, or it shifts to something else (the mother-child relationship, for example).

Adaptation processes has an influence on the perception of classical literature: the new interpretation, the new model, filter the new readings and it is unavoidable within a compositional adaptation movement. Analysing the figure of the nurse at a time of instability in the tradition has allowed to appreciate the scope and influence of filters of this kind. It is henceforth essential to consider them in any study of an evolution of modern literature from ancient literature.

There are two aspects of the character of the Nurse, outlined in the preceding pages. One is the counter-song: the Nurse is in a dialectical position with respect to the milk daughter, consoling but also countering her fears and lines of action. This attitude can only have an emotional content – as in the case of the sister Erminia or the Nurse in *Orbecche*. Alternatively, it can be more active, as in *Rosmunda* or *Canace*.

The systematic study of the Nurse made here, dealing with the development of the heroine's character in Italian tragedy (a character with its chiaroscuro and ambiguities), could provide new insights on how female agency finds space in tragedy. One thing is sure: the study of the nurse-daughter pair, i.e., the study of the relationship between their characters may provide interesting data that shed light on the heroine's character and on the general meaning of the specific tragedies here considered. From the margin, as it were, one can see more and better than from the centre.

Works Cited

Abbreviations

Apollonius, *Arg.* = Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautika*

Boiardo, *IO* = Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Inamoramento de Orlando*.

Dolce, *Hec.* = Ludovico Dolce, *La Hecuba*.

Dolce, *Mar.* = Ludovico Dolce, *Marianna*.

Dolce, *Or.* = Ludovico Dolce, *Orazia*.

Eur. *Alc.* = Euripides, *Alcestis*.

Eur. *El.* = Euripides, *Electra*.

Giraldi, *Orb.* = Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio, *Orbecche*.

Petrarca, *RVF* = Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*.

Rucellai, *Rosm.* = Giovanni Rucellai, *Rosmunda*.

Speroni, *Can.* = Sperone Speroni, *Canace*.

Trissino, *Soph.* = Gian Giorgio Trissino, *Sophonisba*.

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