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Contents

Nutrix

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Special Section

Francesco Puccio*

In the Shadow of Phaedra. The Nurse on Stage between Euripides, Seneca and Marina Cvetaeva

Abstract

In Euripides' *Crowned Hippolytus*, a tragedy in which Phaedra does not openly declare her feelings for Theseus' son, allowing herself to be consumed by pain, the protagonist, in a close dialogue with the Nurse, asks what the essence of love is for humans (τί τοῦθ' ὃ δὴ λέγουσιν ἀνθρώπους ἐρᾶν, 347). And the answer seems almost a prophecy anticipating what is to come (ἥδιστον, ὦ παῖ, ταὐτὸν ἀλγεινόν θ' ἅμα, 348; a very pleasant thing, daughter, but which is painful at the same time).[1] Only in a second moment, Phaedra will really confide in her, pushing her, under the illusion that this could be useful, to break the promise not to tell Hippolytus anything. Thus, in Euripides' text, the Nurse assumes an essential dramaturgical role, as it happens in Seneca's *Phaedra* in which, however, the heroine, having put aside her silence, seeks an immediate remedy for her lovesickness by means of a revealing word. Also in this case the Nurse, far from being an ancillary character, plays a key role: although she does not reveal directly to Hippolytus that her stepmother is in love with him, since it will be Phaedra herself who will confess the truth to her beloved, she will become her accomplice in deceiving Theseus with the story of a rape that never happened. The aim of this contribution is to reflect on the character of the Nurse, both linguistically and scenically, in Euripides' *Crowned Hippolytus*, Seneca's *Phaedra* and, in the perspective of the story's reception on the modern stage, in Marina Cvetaeva's *Phaedra* (1928). The Russian poetess shows a Phaedra not unlike the classical models, mad with love, who nevertheless does not want to admit that she loves Hippolytus. But, what is particularly interesting in this tragedy, is the character of the Nurse who tries, through Phaedra's passion, to experience those emotions that life denied her in youth, dividing herself between love for the queen and hatred for Hippolytus.

Keywords: Nurse; Euripides' *Crowned Hippolytus*; Seneca's *Phaedra*; Cvetaeva's *Phaedra*; ancient drama

1. A Non-Protagonist, but not Secondary Character

The history of the Attic tragic theatre is full of characters – servants, messengers, guards – who, even though cannot be defined as protagonists in

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the strict sense of the word, take on an essential role in the unfolding of the events and mechanisms that contribute to the construction of the plots. Far from being faded sidekicks of the heroes and heroines of the myth, whose fixity of action sometimes tends to place them in a form of immense loneliness, projecting them in a mode of thought and action without real contradictions, they often adopt a variety of behaviours. This aspect makes them, both from the dramaturgical point of view and from the scenic one, equally interesting for the spectator and, we like to imagine, also for the actor who had lent them his body and voice. In this category it is possible to include the character of the Nurse, whose archetype recalls Homeric Eurycleia, the woman bought by Laertes as a slave so that the baby Odysseus could be entrusted to her care and to the milk of her breast. She will represent for some of her specific traits, in fact, a model for the subsequent characterisations.[2]

The old nurse becomes, thus, the indirect protagonist of the second part of the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey*, when during the washing of the foreigner's feet who in disguise has come to Ithaca, she recognises the master Odysseus from an old scar still clearly visible in his thigh:

> τὴν δ' ἅμα χάρμα καὶ ἄλγος ἕλε φρένα, τὼ δέ οἱ ὄσσε
> δακρυόφιν πλῆσθεν, θαλερὴ δέ οἱ ἔσχετο φωνή.
> ἁψαμένη δὲ γενείου Ὀδυσσῆα προσέειπεν·
> ἦ μάλ' Ὀδυσσεύς ἐσσι, φίλον τέκος· οὐδέ σ' ἐγώ γε
> πρὶν ἔγνων, πρὶν πάντα ἄνακτ' ἐμὸν ἀμφαφάασθαι.
> (471-5)
>
> [Joy and sorrow, at the same time, took possession of her heart, her eyes filled with tears, her voice failed. After touching the chin of Odysseus, she said: "You are Odysseus, my beloved son; I did not recognise you, my lord, before I touched you in every part."]

In a number of tragic texts, albeit with different meanings and in contexts not always overlapping, such as Aeschylus' *Choephori*, Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, in which the old nurse gives advice to a Deianira who is increasingly unsure of her husband's love, or Euripides' *Medea*, *Andromache* and *Hippolytus*, the Nurse appears as a decisive character, often able to modify and

[2] The character of Eurycleia is closely connected with the events of the house of Odysseus since the beginning of the poem, as evidenced by the episode in which Telemachus, revealing a certain intimacy with the Nurse, asks her to prepare twelve amphorae of wine in view of the journey that he is going to make to Sparta and Pylos in search of news of his father (*Od.* 2.349-70). For a reflection on the character of the Nurse from the *Odyssey* to the tragedies of Seneca, see Castagna 2009. More generally, on the concept of 'realism' characterising this scene of Odysseus' recognition by Eurycleia, thanks to the scar on the hero's thigh, see Auerbach 2000, 3-29.

condition the events characterising the relationships on the stage.[3] However, if we imagine that, among the tragic texts, we can identify a sort of gradual level of participation of our character in the events of the protagonists, it is precisely *Hippolytus* that represents an exemplary reference, since it is in this play that the Nurse triggers a series of determining scenic mechanisms in the overall architecture.[4]

In *Hippolytus*, a tragedy in which Phaedra does not openly declare her feelings for Theseus' son, allowing herself to be consumed by grief, the protagonist, in a close dialogue with the Nurse, asks what the essence of love is for humans. And the answer seems almost like a prophecy anticipating what will happen next:

> Φα. τί τοῦθ' ὃ δὴ λέγουσιν ἀνθρώπους ἐρᾶν;
> Τρ. ἥδιστον, ὦ παῖ, ταὐτὸν ἀλγεινόν θ' ἅμα.
> (347-8)
>
> [Phaedra What is it, then, that humans call love? Nurse A very sweet thing, daughter, but which can be painful at the same time.]

It is only later that Phaedra really confides in her, prompting her, under the illusion that it will help, to break the promise not to reveal anything to

[3] In *Coephoroi*, the woman who remembers having brought up Orestes as a son delivered to her by his mother (μητρόθεν), limits herself to carrying out the orders of the Chorus so that everything turns out for the best (*Ch.* 767-82); in *Trachiniai*, her task seems to be reduced rather to that of a handmaid who uses a long *rhesis* in which she expounds the steps that led Deianira, victim of an incurable grief for having caused the death of Heracles, to kill herself (*Tr.* 899-946); also in *Medea*, because of the exceptional dramaturgical stature of the protagonist her role assumes a minor weight (*Med.* 185-203), while perhaps it is in *Andromache* that the Nurse is placed in a dialectical position equal to her lady Hermione (*Andr.* 866-78).

[4] The Nurse of Euripides' *Hippolytus* constitutes one of the most significant cases, within the entire tragic production, of that bond of confidence existing between a wet nurse and the infant entrusted to her care, to the point of being made explicit also on a linguistic level with the distinction between τροφός and μαῖα, as Arata 2009, 936-7, rightly points out: "The relationship of confidence that is established over time between nurse and cared-for child is manifested by this word felt in etymological connection with μητήρ: μαῖα, in fact, in many cases where it means wet nurse, appears in dialogic contexts. Thus it must have a special meaning, an affectionate connotation that a stranger cannot afford: both in *Od.* 2.349ff. and in 19.16ff. when Homer has to refer to Eurycleia, he does not call her μαῖα, but τροφός, which must have sounded more official, denoting her social *status* without adding a note of tenderness". In *Hippolytus* the two terms are used in different contexts: if the Chorus addresses the Nurse using the term τροφός (*Hipp.* 267), Phaedra, on two other occasions when the torment that devours her has reached a certain intensity (*Hipp.* 243, 311), chooses instead the term μαῖα, as if to emphasise the need to establish with the old nurse a relationship of exclusive affection in which she can find refuge and protection.

Hippolytus. Thus, in Euripides' text, the Nurse embodies an essential dramaturgical function, as it also happens in Seneca's *Phaedra;* in which, however, the heroine, having put aside her silence, seeks an immediate remedy for her lovesickness by means of a revealing word. In this case too, the woman, far from being an ancillary character, plays a key role, giving a decisive impulse to the unfolding of the story: although she does not reveal directly to Hippolytus that the stepmother is in love with him, since it will be Phaedra herself who will confess the truth to her beloved, she will nevertheless become her accomplice in deceiving Theseus with the story of a rape that never took place.[5]

The aim of this paper is, therefore, an enquiry into the character of the Nurse on a linguistic and scenic level in Euripides' *Hippolytus*,[6] in Seneca's *Phaedra* and, in a perspective of the reception of the story on the modern stage,[7] in Marina Cvetaeva's twentieth-century *Phaedra*. The Russian poetess depicts a Phaedra who only partly recalls the classical models. Although enveloped in the spiral of a desperate passion, she has never been a mother – she had no children with Theseus – nor has she ever acted as a stepmother to Hippolytus. She is above all a young woman, alone, far from homeland, who has never been able to share her marriage with an older husband, constantly engaged in an enterprise to be carried out in some remote corner of the world, and who suddenly discovers, at the first sight of Hippolytus, the strength and beauty of love as an absolute, yet innocent, pure feeling. And

[5] Even in Racine's famous rewriting of the story in 1677, it is the Nurse who accuses Hippolytus with the silent complicity of her lady, choosing a perspective that the author himself explains in the preface to the tragedy as a dramaturgical necessity that could, from his point of view, make the character more credible: "J'ai cru que la calomnie avait quelque chose de trop bas et de trop noir pour la mettre dans la bouche d'une princesse qui a d'ailleurs des sentiments si nobles et si vertueux. Cette bassesse m'a paru plus convenable à une nourrice, qui pouvait avoir des inclinations plus serviles, et qui néanmoins n'entreprend cette fausse accusation que pour sauver la vie et l'honneur de sa maîtresse" ("I thought that there was something too low and too black in the slander to put it in the mouth of a princess who has such noble and virtuous feelings. This baseness seemed to me more appropriate to a nurse, who could have more servile inclinations, and who nevertheless only undertakes this false accusation to save the life and honour of her mistress"), Racine 1995, 30.

[6] For an investigation into the role of the Nurse as an autonomous character, yet strongly interrelated with the others who act in the drama, and characterised by a relevant scenic and linguistic specificity within Euripides' text, see: Calvani 1966, 71-94; Blitgen 1969, 85-6; Turato 1976, 159-83; Mendes De Castro 1983, 79-88; Paduano 1984, 45-66; Martina 1988-1989, 87-132; Deforest 1989, 71-6, who even suggests that the Nurse might be Aphrodite in disguise.

[7] For an account of the reception of Phaedra's story beyond the specific character of the Nurse, see, among the numerous studies, the most recent ones: Burian 1997, 228-83; Mayer 2002; Degl'Innocenti Pierini et al. 2007; Rubino 2008.

a further reason for interest in this tragedy is the character of the Nurse, a woman who tries to experience, through the passion of her lady, those emotions that life denied her in youth, torn between love for the queen and hatred for Hippolytus.

2. The Character of the Nurse in Euripides' *Crowned Hippolytus*

The story of the *Crowned Hippolytus*, so defined thanks to the precious scenic indication in l. 73 in which the character appears adorned with a crown (πλεκτὸν στέφανον), is set in Troezen, where Theseus had been sent into exile for a year because of the murder of Pallas' sons. This version followed, in 428 BC, the unfortunate staging of an earlier *Veiled Hippolytus*,[8] censored by the Athenian audience because of Phaedra's explicit revelation of her pathological passion to her stepson.[9] The tragedy opens with a prologue recited by the goddess Aphrodite, who recounts the offence that Theseus' son had caused her by refusing her, since the guy, in the name of a form of religious fanaticism that had turned into a real *hybris*, preferred to honour Artemis and spend his time hunting in the woods, in constant pursuit of an ideal of purity irreconcilable with the world of Cypris.[10]

Anticipating the plot of the events that will unfold on the stage and stirred by the desire to take revenge on the too chaste Hippolytus, the goddess introduces the main characters to the audience and almost highlights

[8] See, in this regard, Méridier 1973, 13 (f.n. 2): "The first *Hippolytus* . . . bears the title of καλυπτόμενος from Pollux, *Onom.* 9, 50 and Stobaeus 12, 10, of κατακαλυπτόμενος from the *scholia* to l. 10 of Theocritus' idyll II. These epithets must be attributed to grammarians or actors rather than to poets. In spite of the discussions and the sometimes strange hypotheses which they have given rise to, their meaning does not seem doubtful. Στεφανίας and στεφανηφόρος allude to the crown which Hippolytus offers to Artemis in the preserved drama (l.73 ff.)".

[9] A circumstance that seems to come from a passage in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (*Ra.* 1043-4), in which, in the famous underworld dispute between Aeschylus and Euripides, the old poet reproaches the younger tragedian that only a woman as depraved as Phaedra could have acted in such an improper way on stage: Ἀλλ' οὐ μὰ Δί' οὐ Φαίδρας ἐποίουν πόρνας οὐδὲ Σθενεβοίας, / οὐδ' οἶδ' οὐδεὶς ἥντιν' ἐρῶσαν πώποτ' ἐποίησα γυναῖκα ("But, for God, I have never made whores like Phaedra and Stheneboea, no one has ever seen a woman in love written by me").

[10] Hippolytus' continued rejection of the adult world and the condition of virility that pertains to it, embodied in his non-acceptance of Aphrodite, conveys his insistence on remaining in the adolescent sphere, with all that this entails, such as lingering over hunting practices and wanting to dangerously expand the perimeter of an age now over. In this regard, see Zeitlin 1985, 52-111. On the nature of the feeling of purity animating Hippolytus' behaviour, see also Segal 1970, 278-99. By the same author, on Seneca's *Phaedra*, see also 1986.

Phaedra's substantial otherness to the disaster that is about to befall. It is by divine will, therefore, that the queen has been struck by the insane love for her stepson, described by Aphrodite as a yearning lived in silence and beware of revelation:

> ἐνταῦθα δὴ στένουσα κἀκπεπληγμένη
> κέντροις ἔρωτος ἡ τάλαιν' ἀπόλλυται
> σιγῇ, ξύνοιδε δ' οὔτις οἰκετῶν νόσον.
> (38-40)
>
> [The wretch suffers, tormented by the stings of Eros, wearing herself out in silence, with no one in the royal palace knowing the cause of her illness.]

We can almost imagine, with a sort of paradox that leads us to reflect on the outcome of the story itself, that without the Nurse's intervention – and in the absence of her revelatory function played by the incautious confession made to Hippolytus, in the deceptive illusion that this would not have provoked fatal consequences, but a peaceful resolution of the matter – Euripides' Phaedra would perhaps not have triggered any tragic mechanism and would have preserved for herself, in the intimate and silent pain of a soliloquy, the most atrocious of sufferings.[11]

It is only later, in fact, when the queen confides in the Nurse, that the real dramatic action begins. She declares what is really happening to her and shows a degree of upheaval that cannot be resolved by the interlocutor's arguments, however inspired by the common sense and the lived experience, exemplified in the generic maxim uttered in 207, according to which it is inevitable that humans suffer (μοχθεῖν δὲ βροτοῖσιν ἀνάγκη). In this way, the Cretan queen shows all her emotional exposure to the pain of love, the vulnerability of a soul in turmoil reverberating, at the same time and not less strongly, in the restlessness of a worn-out and exhausted body.[12]

There is no doubt that Phaedra dominates the scene until the end of the second episode, while waiting for Hippolytus, whose essential characteristics

[11] It is the whole dramaturgical system of the four main characters, namely Phaedra, Nurse, Hippolytus and Theseus, that is built on the dialectical relationship between the word and the silence, so that the choice of one is opposed to the use of the other, according to a skilful balance that well organises the scenic tension. See, in this regard, for a reflection on the role of the Nurse, rather than on her scenic autonomy, Knox 1952, 3-31.

[12] The Nurse's behaviour seems to recall, both physically and verbally, the persuasive mode of pleading, as Longo 1989, 57, appropriately observes: "Phaedra reveals herself to the Nurse because the Nurse uses a coercive practice, both verbal and gestural, a practice which for the Greeks possessed an exceptional coercive force: supplication. The Nurse forces Phaedra to speak by means of the ritualised gesture of the supplicant: she bends at her feet, grasps her hand, hugs her knees".

are preliminarily defined, to come to life as a crucial character, around whom the substance of the tragic story can be built, but it is the Nurse who has the task of leading the game and moving the threads of the drama. From a strictly scenic point of view, her desire to push Phaedra to confess, clearly emerges from the need to establish a physical relationship with her, to translate the zeal of a faithful servant into a familiar and immediate contact, capable of cancelling the distances of age and, above all, of social condition, so as to place the two women, both the young and irrational queen and the more adult and prudent nurse, on the same level of discussion.[13] And even though Phaedra seems almost to perceive all this as a prevarication, a subterranean forcing, she is unable to reject the Nurse and to escape her insistent demands, to the point that the supplicant's hand,[14] becoming as it were sacred, cannot be expelled or removed, nor is it possible to find a form of conciliation or an alternative resolution:

Φα. τί δρᾶις; βιάζηι, χειρὸς ἐξαρτωμένη;
Τρ. καὶ σῶν γε γονάτων, κοὐ μεθήσομαί ποτε.
Φα. κάκ' ὦ τάλαινά σοι τάδ', εἰ πεύσηι, κακά.
Τρ. μεῖζον γὰρ ἢ σου μὴ τυχεῖν τί μοι κακόν;
Φα. ὀλῆι. τὸ μέντοι πρᾶγμ' ἐμοὶ τιμὴν φέρει.
Τρ. κἄπειτα κρύπτεις, χρήσθ' ἱκνουμένης ἐμοῦ;
Φα. ἐκ τῶν γὰρ αἰσχρῶν ἐσθλὰ μηχανώμεθα.
Τρ. οὔκουν λέγουσα τιμιωτέρα φανῆι;
Φα. ἄπελθε πρὸς θεῶν δεξιάν τ' ἐμὴν μέθες.
Τρ. οὐ δῆτ', ἐπεί μοι δῶρον οὐ δίδως ὃ χρῆν.
Φα. δώσω· σέβας γὰρ χειρὸς αἰδοῦμαι τὸ σόν.
(325-35)

[Phaedra What are you doing? You're hurting me if you shake my hand. Nurse My knees too, and I won't leave you. Phaedra Bad for you too, unfortunate one, bad if you learn of these things. Nurse What evil would be greater for me than not being able to persuade you? Phaedra You will die of it. Yet this situation brings me honour. Nurse And so you hide it, while begging for your own good? Phaedra I intend to make good out of this shameful affair. Nurse Then speaking, would you not appear more noble? Phaedra Go away, by the gods, and leave my hand. Nurse No, since you haven't given me the necessary gift. Phaedra I will. I have respect, indeed, for your suppliant hand.]

[13] For an analysis of the character of the Nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in the perspective of a re-evaluation of a non-marginal role going beyond the boundaries of the simple confidant, see Grillone 1972-1973, 67-88.

[14] On the meaning of the pleading as a ritual expression of reciprocity regarding a universally recognised value, see Gould 1973, 74-103.

The Nurse, incarnation of a world that cannot understand the origin and meaning of certain extreme passions, typical of heroes and heroines – animated by the sympathy and the conviction that any action dictated by the intemperance is doomed to failure, as it will happen to Hippolytus himself – tries to lead her lady on a much more conventional path, hoping that this will dispose her mind to a calm reasoning, governed by the common sense and the experience of life. Her attempt to use the supplicant's linguistic and gestural code to undermine her lady's reluctance gets the required effect. Phaedra, therefore, tormented not only by Hippolytus' desire but also by the Nurse's prayers, gives in and reveals the origin of the evil:[15]

> Δέσποιν', ἐμοί τοι συμφορὰ μὲν ἀρτίως
> ἡ σὴ παρέσχε δεινὸν ἐξαίφνης φόβον·
> νῦν δ' ἐννοοῦμαι φαῦλος οὖσα, κἀν βροτοῖς
> αἱ δεύτεραί πως φροντίδες σοφώτεραι.
> οὐ γὰρ περισσὸν οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἔξω λόγου
> πέπονθας, ὀργαὶ δ' ἐς σ' ἀπέσκηψαν θεᾶς.
> ἐρᾶις (τί τοῦτο θαῦμα;) σὺν πολλοῖς βροτῶν·
> κἄπειτ' ἔρωτος οὕνεκα ψυχὴν ὀλεῖς;
> οὔ τἄρα λύει τοῖς ἐρῶσι τῶν πέλας,
> ὅσοι τε μέλλουσ', εἰ θανεῖν αὐτοὺς χρεών.
> (433-42)
>
> [My lady, a little while ago, your condition suddenly gave me a terrible sense of fear. Now I understand that I am a poor woman, and I realise that, for mortals, thinking things over allows us to understand them more clearly. You have not suffered any extraordinary or strange situation: the wrath of a goddess has fallen upon you. You are in love, why should you be surprised? After all, it is a condition you share with many human beings. Don't you want to die for love? It would certainly be an interesting fact if those who love someone now were to die later!]

When she hears the name of Theseus' young son as the object of desire the Nurse is shocked, but she does not really understand the agony hidden in Phaedra, nor can she share a heroic gesture that would lead to an extreme outcome. So, in response to the lady's intention to kill herself, she tries to counteract a maternal instinct of protection, as if she were still a child, and

[15] On the dramaturgical dialectic between humble and powerful characters in Euripides' early tragedies, see Grillone 1979, 124-9. For a reflection on the revaluation of this typology of characters in Euripides' production, see Brandt 1973. Moreover, as Daitz 1971, 217-26, observes with regard to the concept of freedom and slavery in *Hecuba*, Euripides tried several times in his texts to stimulate the spectator to a less partial and prejudiced reading of people's moral qualities, placing them in a framework that did not take into account the social condition they belonged to.

appeals to an expedient that, besides avoiding a scandal, might force the reluctant Hippolytus to yield: a love potion. Phaedra accepts, but perhaps understands, or at least perceives, that this is not a magic potion; only an indirect attempt at confession:

> Φα. πότερα δὲ χριστὸν ἢ ποτὸν τὸ φάρμακον;
> Τρ. οὐκ οἶδ'· ὀνάσθαι, μὴ μαθεῖν βούλου, τέκνον.
> Φα. δέδοιχ' ὅπως μοι μὴ λίαν φανῇς σοφή.
> Τρ. πάντ' ἂν φοβηθεῖσ' ἴσθι· δειμαίνεις δὲ τί;
> (516-19)
>
> [Phaedra Is this medicine for spreading or drinking? Nurse I don't know. Don't want to know, my daughter, but think about taking advantage of it. Phaedra I'm afraid you're too clever. Nurse Then you should fear everything. But what are you afraid of?]

Although Phaedra is urged to speak and to accept her condition as a "lovesick woman", in the distinction between what can also be revealed to men and what can only be communicated within a female context, she has actually used a relative, partial word, invoking a silence that comes to life within a system in which role and environment show a clear distinction. The tragedy thus highlights with greater clarity, from this moment onwards, the two opposing conceptions that animate the scene: on the one hand Phaedra, with the violent image of a subjection to the force of existence that ends up suppressing the dimension of spirituality; on the other one Hippolytus, with corporeality's rejection through the exaltation of an isolation that, similarly, brings no benefit to those who are its staunch supporters.

The Nurse, therefore, in the name of an immediate action that translates on a real level, not only a verbal one, the opportunity of a final solution to the suffering of her beloved lady, runs away in search of Hippolytus.[16] The revelation of the woman, who now presents herself in the guise of a procuress, takes place in the backstage area, as if it were not to be heard directly by the spectator and by the addressee of the confession himself, still immersed in the presumed innocence of an Edenic and guiltless world. But the reaction of Hippolytus, on whose knees the woman throws herself, as she had done with Phaedra, although with a different motivation, is equally violent and full of disgust at the words he has been forced to hear, to the point that the devotee of Artemis would like to immerse his ears in a mirror

[16] The Nurse proves to be expert in using differentiated rhetorical and gestural techniques and, as Longo 1989, 58, notes again: "To protect herself from the possible consequences of this revelation, just as with Phaedra she had resorted to the expedient of the coercive entreaty to make her speak, the fearsome maid resorted with Hippolytus to another form of coercion, the binding oath, in order to silence him".

of pure spring water:

> ὡς καὶ σύ γ' ἡμῖν πατρός, ὦ κακὸν κάρα,
> λέκτρων ἀθίκτων ἦλθες ἐς συναλλαγάς·
> ἀγὼ ῥυτοῖς νασμοῖσιν ἐξομόρξομαι,
> ἐς ὦτα κλύζων. πῶς ἂν οὖν εἴην κακός,
> ὃς οὐδ' ἀκούσας τοιάδ' ἁγνεύειν δοκῶ;
> (651-5)
>
> [And you, cursed one, have come to offer me my father's inviolable bed! I will purify myself with running waters, pouring them on my ears. How could I be so impious, I who believe I am defiled merely by hearing such words?]

The guy flees the city indignantly, promising to return only when his father will come back, although he is bitterly aware that nothing will allow him to recover his lost innocence, since the shameful and guilty word, now revealed, can no longer be forgotten.

As the Nurse's word, in fact, has managed to give physicality to the evil until it became real, vivid and tangible, so the absence of the word would have represented the only possible antidote to the disease, the only real *pharmacon* to be taken, in spite of alleged filters and deceptive potions. But the power of madness imposed by Aphrodite at the beginning of the story is more effective than that of silence: forced to resort to other remedies, Phaedra tries to exercise her virtue: but this expedient is ineffective too.

In order to regain her lost honour, she has no choice but to kill herself, but not before devising a plan of revenge against Hippolytus: in a letter to be delivered to Theseus after her death, the guy is accused by the stepmother of having inflicted violence on her. For her suicide, Phaedra will choose a noose tied around the neck, unlike Hippolytus' sword used in Seneca's drama, almost metaphorically sanctioning the desire for an eternal union. At the end, Artemis appears on stage as *dea ex machina*, revealing the truth to Theseus and, with the attribution to Hippolytus of great honours (τιμὰς μεγίστας) to be celebrated at Troezen, the tragedy ends as it began: with the epiphany of a divinity, although this time it is not Aphrodite, but a goddess opposed to her.

3. The Nurse in Seneca's *Phaedra*: a *mens bona* Vainly Struggling against the Madness of Love

In the Latin reception of the story there are some rather significant changes in the overall composition, and the Nurse herself takes on a different function from the Greek model. Actually, in the tragedy which Seneca chooses to set in Athens, Phaedra is in love with her stepson Hippolytus; recalling elements

already found in Euripides, he refuses the love of women in favour of hunting and life in the woods. Despite the Nurse's initial attempts to dissuade her, Phaedra decides to confess her love to the guy, but Hippolytus, horrified, flees the palace. The queen then wants to take revenge and, when Theseus returns from his venture into the underworld with Pirithous, she tells him in a lie that Hippolytus has tried to rape her.

Enraged, Theseus curses his son, tearing his body to pieces in a horrible death. As soon as Hippolytus' body is brought back to the palace, Phaedra confesses her crime to Theseus and kills herself. The old king has no choice but to mourn his fate and reassemble the body of his son, after ordering the servants to throw Phaedra's into a pit.

The tragedy, which opened with the song of Hippolytus inviting his companions to hunt, ends, in a sort of metaphorical contrast, with the frantic search for his remains, to which the servants are called as if he was an animal killed in a hunting context. Diana's faithful "husband" becomes the object of the search; his beauty, trampled by the outrage of the dispersal of his limbs, is shattered before the belligerence of love. The painful end of the guy thus demonstrates the unpredictable ways of fate, which, because of a divine injustice, grants its gifts with a blind hand, favouring the worst and letting innocence be overcome by arbitrariness.

In comparison with Euripides' text, Seneca gives Oenone, the Nurse – who appears very early on the stage – a role almost equal to that of her lady. It is as if the ancillary condition of which she is the bearer *kata physin*, should not represent an obstacle to the affirmation of certain general principles on the danger of an extreme passion and its consequences, but a privileged perspective from which to observe the intricate tangle of the human soul and, from there, to dispense useful advice.[17] She is therefore the driving force of the dramaturgical mechanism, revealing herself to be an acute and sincere observer, endowed with a lucid and pragmatic intelligence, devoid of tearful excesses and useless *pathos*, even when she calls for help the citizens of Athens so that they may take part in Hippolytus' violent act ("Adeste, Athenae! Fida famulorum manus, / fer opem", 725-6; "Hurry, citizens of Athens! Trusted host of servants, bring us help").

In this way the dialogue between the two women takes on the usual mode of a contrast between two antithetical visions in Seneca's dramas: the first one, embodied in this case by Phaedra, which has the aspects proper

[17] On the relationship between Phaedra and her Nurse, see Heldmann 1968, 88-117. For a specific reflection on the dramaturgical aspects of Seneca's *Phaedra*, which is appropriately considered a text rich in multiple theatrical perspectives that can be followed during its staging, given the particular evidence of the visual aspects characterising it, see Albini 1985, 133-9. For an overall reading on the representability of Seneca's plays, see Sutton 1986.

to *furor* and is consumed in a *dolor* without resolution, almost a monster that progressively feeds on the body in which it dwells ("alitur et crescit malum / et ardet intus", 101-2; "evil feeds and grows, and burns within"); the second one, embodied instead by the Nurse, which is expressed through the moral light of a *mens bona* guided by an all-human *ratio*, but able to spot misfortunes and beware of them:

> Thesea coniunx, clara progenies Iovis,
> nefanda casto pectore exturba ocius,
> extingue flammas neve te dirae spei
> praebe obsequentem: quisquis in primo obstitit
> pepulitque amorem, tutus ac victor fuit;
> qui blandiendo dulce nutrivit malum,
> sero recusat ferre quod subiit iugum.
> Nec me fugit, quam durus et veri insolens
> ad recta flecti regius nolit tumor,
> quemcumque dederit exitum casus feram:
> fortem facit vicina libertas senem.
> (129-39)
>
> [Wife of Theseus, bright race of Jupiter, pluck from your pure heart all wickedness, extinguish the flames and do not show yourself a follower of a cursed hope. Whoever from the beginning opposed it and drove away the passion, was safe and victorious; whoever nourished that evil by gently flattering it, later refuses to bear the yoke to which he submitted. Nor does it escape me how the royal pride, intransigent and contemptuous of truth, does not want to be bent to righteousness. Whatever the outcome of the case may be, I will endure it: the near freedom makes the old strong.]

Seneca chooses to stage a situation of an already broken silence, eliminating the description of Phaedra's silent torment of love and the whole part relating to the long, painful revelation to the Nurse of the true reason for that incurable illness, which assumes such importance in the elaboration of Euripides' tragedy. If in the first scene of *Hippolytus* we see Phaedra's torment, lacerated by the almost impossible choice between words and silence, in Seneca's drama the queen reveals from the outset, in addition to the hatred for her own condition of suffering, inherited from the ancient sins of a mother protagonist of extreme nefariousness, the tormented, obscene love possessing her.

She is a woman who complains about Theseus' absence and infidelities, ready to justify her *furor amoris* as the effect of a family perversion, since the same wild desire felt by the mother Pasiphae resurfaces as an inherited guilt. If there is a dilemma in her between speech and silence, it seems to have already been resolved in favour of speech, which ends up losing that

sacredness with which it had been covered in the Greek drama. From the beginning, Phaedra shows, in fact, this kind of awareness which, in her explanation, relates to the destiny of a perverted love, inherent in the lineage and already manifest in the house:

> Quae memoras scio
> vera esse, nutrix; sed furor cogit sequi
> peiora, vadit animus in praeceps sciens
> remeatque frustra sana consilia appetens.
> sic cum gravatam navita adversa ratem
> propellit unda, cedit in vanum labor
> et victa prono puppis aufertur vado.
> quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor
> potensque tota mente dominatur deus.
> (177-85)

> [The things you remind me of, I know to be true, Nurse; but madness impels me to follow even worse evils. My mind wittingly plunges, trying in vain to retrace its steps in search of reasonable propositions. Thus, when the helmsman makes the ship advance, weighed down by the adverse waves, his attempts are useless, because, having been defeated, the ship is carried away by the tide that is pushing it. What could reason do? The madness wins and reigns, the strong god dominates all my mind.]

Seneca's *Phaedra* therefore has its own originality compared to Euripides' model, regardless of the variations on the myth and the interpretative developments, which have their own specific value. First of all, the origin of the love sickness is different: external in Euripides' Phaedra, who is the victim, as we have said, of Aphrodite's revenge; completely intimate in Seneca's one. This is not a marginal detail, if we consider that in the Latin tragedy the two goddesses are absent from the scene, whereas they had constituted an inescapable dramaturgical element in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, beyond the scenic function of framing the whole story.

In Euripides' tragedy the presence of Aphrodite and the vindictive nature of her action cast a veil of participation over Phaedra, establishing a condition of substantial guiltlessness which, on the contrary, does not seem to be associated to the protagonist of Seneca's drama, who presents herself, right from the start, without shame. This insanity of love is flaunted, before being suffered: a very careful diagnosis is made of it, almost as if it were, in the character's explicit denunciation, a sort of extension of her mother's wildness, an involuntary behaviour that should save her from guilt.

And the Nurse herself is very precise in giving an account of this phenomenology of amorous passion, in perceiving every change in Phaedra's body and soul, and in attempting to raise a bank capable of containing

the storm that is brewing. But Oenone is progressively overwhelmed by the strength of her protégée's feelings, to the point that the alternation of the initial arguments, translated into a lively exchange of jokes well balanced in their respective motivations, is replaced, in the growing mutual incomprehension, by a sort of resigned monologue in which the old nurse can only conclude that nothing more can be done to save the queen:

> Spes nulla tantum posse leniri malum,
> finisque flammis nullus insanis erit.
> torretur aestu tacito et inclusus quoque,
> quamvis tegatur, proditur vultu furor;
> erumpit oculis ignis et lassae genae
> lucem recusant, nil idem dubiae placet
> artusque varie iactat incertus dolor,
> nunc ut soluto labitur moriens gradu
> et vix labante sustinet collo caput,
> nunc se quieti reddit et, somni immemor,
> noctem querelis ducit.
> (360-70)
>
> [There is no hope from such great evil, and there will be no end to those insane flames. She is burned by a hidden fire, and although she is locked up, although she is covered up, the madness appears in her face: fire pours out of her eyes, yet her tired pupils refuse the light; she likes nothing, victim of doubt, and a pain coming from various parts weakens her limbs; now, like a dying woman, she staggers with an unnerved step, barely keeping the head on her neck that cannot stand, now she gives herself up to rest and, forgetting sleep, spends the night amidst lamentations.]

Even if the madness is lucid, because Phaedra knows how to identify the principle from which it arises, its epiphanies are contradictory and ambivalent. What in Euripides the queen tries in every way to hide, in Seneca is exhibited, almost ostentatiously, as a sign of discharge, a justification to be put forward as soon as possible. If in Euripides the suffering that afflicts her has to wait a long time before being defined in its origin, almost as if, despite the evident symptoms, its existence were to be denied, in Seneca it finds an incontrovertible proof of its original cause. Aphrodite is interiorised: her character disappears from the scene in the dramaturgical form of the prologue used by Euripides, to reappear in Seneca's text behind the metaphorical appearance of an inner conflict, where Phaedra conceives by herself, without any external intervention, the deadly passion for the young stepson.

If the innocent Euripidean heroine lives her drama in the absolute conviction that she must kill herself before the crime is committed or revealed, and believes it necessary to keep intact the good name to pass

on to her children, the protagonist of Seneca's drama, lacerated by *furor*, silences her rational side. As a result, at times she shows herself to be devoid of any form of modesty, not at all concerned for her children, anxious only to reveal the love to Hippolytus, at other times uncertain, longing for death, in an irremediable conflict taking place entirely within her soul. She lives a love dictated by madness and speaks in the first person, immediately declaring herself to be solely responsible and aware of the passion that devours her. As in Euripides' text it is Aphrodite who regulates the play of the parts, so in Seneca's one it is the protagonist herself who governs the drama, establishing its basic characteristics and defining, within the circumscribed spaces of her interiority, the origin, evolution and outcome of the story.

Even when the Nurse finds herself in the presence of Hippolytus, in an attempt to fulfil the same ancillary and supportive function played in Euripides – although in a sequence of little dramaturgical importance, since it will be from Phaedra's own mouth that the truth will emerge – she maintains her scenic quality, without dissolving into the faded role of a marginal character. The attempts to persuade Hippolytus to open up to female love are numerous, but the guy shows off his ecstatic yearnings for nature, abandoning himself to forms of moral preaching. Indifferent to power, luxury and any flattery of worldliness, he belongs to a world of purity and simplicity that seems to coincide in many points with Senecan morality. And so the Nurse, in front of such immovable obstinacy, has no choice but to leave the space for Phaedra's entrance, once again showing an immediate capacity for recognising danger:

> Vt dura cautes undique intractabilis
> resistit undis et lacessentes aquas
> longe remittit, verba sic spernit mea.
> Sed Phaedra praeceps graditur, impatiens
> quo se dabit fortuna? quo verget furor?
> terrae repente corpus exanimum accidit
> et ora morti similis obduxit color,
> attolle vultus, dimove vocis moras:
> tuus en, alumna, temet Hippolytus tenet.
> (580-8)
>
> [As a rock hard and unassailable on all sides stands against the waves and pushes away the waters that strike it, so he despises my words, but here Phaedra rushes in, eager for delay. But where will fate turn? And where the fury? Suddenly her lifeless body falls to the ground, and a death-like colour has covered her face, raise your eyes, remove the lingering of your voice: behold, it is your Hippolytus, my daughter, who holds you in his arms.]

And yet even the chaste Hippolytus, who would seem to represent a positive

force due to certain characteristics, is dominated by a sort of blind *furor*, as extreme as Phaedra's one, although of an opposite nature. In fact, his exasperated and stubborn misogyny and his unmotivated claim that one can do without women are a sign of lunacy, giving rise to a form of hatred that is by no means hidden. A true weaver of plots, the Nurse, having failed in all her attempts to convince Hippolytus – who turns out to be far too proud of his rustic nature, pursuer of an absolute feeling of uncontaminated purity, son of a natural world that will also represent, grotesquely and with a tragic irony, the place of his death – devises the final fatal plot:

> Deprensa culpa est. anime, quid segnis stupes?
> regeramus ipsi crimen atque ultro impiam
> Venerem arguamus: scelere velandum est scelus:
> tutissimum est inferre, cum timeas, gradum.
> (719-22)
>
> [The guilt has been discovered. My soul, why are you terrified? We charge him with the crime and accuse him of unholy love: villainy with villainy must be veiled. The safest thing is to attack, when you are afraid.]

It is perhaps in this lapidary *sententia* (724) that the Nurse, before the imminent arrival of Theseus, when all will be discovered and no secret can be concealed any longer, reveals the dramaturgical depth of her character. The intention to place the blame for what has happened on Hippolytus, spreading the *rumor* of a rape never happened, and the subsequent ambiguity with which she addresses the king, hiding the real reason for Phaedra's tears of woe, once again testify to the lucidity of reasoning of a very well thought-out character.

Far from being the passive repository of a simple confession of love, the Nurse's behaviour also seems to foreshadow, thanks to the multifaceted characterisation that distinguishes her, the dark ending of a story in which many passions intersect.

Unlike the Euripidean model, in fact, in which Hippolytus begs the father to veil his face in a conclusive, imaginary form of reconciliation (κρύψον δέ μου πρόσωπον ὡς τάχος πέπλοις [cover my face as soon as possible with peplums], 1458), in Seneca's *Phaedra* there seems to be no room for redemption or salvation: the fierce world of Theseus's palace, in which murky feelings and slanderous revelations have come to life, has swallowed up the shadows of its victims, and now only the silence of desolation remains in the background.

4. A Dark Schemer: the Nurse in Marina Cvetaeva's *Phaedra*

The first aspect that is particularly striking when reading Cvetaeva's

Phaedra,[18] apart from the undoubted comparisons with a myth that retains its essential lines, is the characterisation of the Nurse, a well-constructed character on a dramaturgical level who occupies a prominent position in the drama and who stands alongside an equally unusual Phaedra, partly distant from the famous characters that preceded her.[19]

The tragedy, which consists of 1978 verses, is divided into four scenes: in the first, *The Stay*, which is based on the traditional image of the Amazon's young son, Hippolytus and his hunter friends appear on stage and together they pay homage to the goddess Artemis in the name of male brotherhood and friendship; in the second, *The Recognition*, in a long confrontation between Phaedra and the Nurse,[20] the woman's feelings of love emerge but, unlike previous models, they do not upset the old nurse at all:

Федра
Пролетишь на всем скаку,
Поклонюсь тебе с сука.
Тяжел плод тому суку,
Тяжел плод суку – тоска.
Кормилица
В сбственном мозгу задорина –
Сук. Кровь с разумом повздорили –
Половина с половиною.
Ствол с больною сердцевиною.

[18] Cvetaeva's *Phaedra* was published in Paris in 1928 and was the second drama of a trilogy, never completed, dedicated to the character of Theseus, which also included *Ariadne*, composed in Prague between 1923 and 1924, but which did not appear until 1927. In Italy, the tragedy was performed in its original language in June 1989, during the Intercity Festival, at the Teatro della Limonaia in Sesto Fiorentino, directed by Roman Viktjuk. What is surprising about this production, however, is the elimination of such an important character in the dramaturgical structure as the Nurse. In an attempt to summarise the text, in fact, the director "eliminates the important peasant character of the nurse, emblem of the earth and evil genius of the heroine. Evidently the director Roman Viktjuk is more interested in the funeral ritual of mourning that accompanies Phaedra's appearances and offers him ideas for recovering the image of Cvetaeva on stage", Quadri 1989, 26. On Cvetaeva's poetic path, see: Karlinsky 1985; Lossky 1988.

[19] As De Nardis 1990, 11 points out, Cvetaeva's Phaedra is a woman "very different from the illustrious models, an 'innocent' Phaedra, despite her incestuous love, a Phaedra created for the first time by a woman's sensibility". For an overall reflection on Cvetaeva's *Phaedra*, see also Bazzarelli 1987, 31-61.

[20] On the stage presence of the Nurse, Thomson 1989, 340, appropriately remarks: "In Euripides, her part is second only to that of Hippolytus and it is almost as prominent in Seneca and Racine; in Tsvetaeva she speaks more lines than any other character. Thus the Nurse is an important element in the myth from the start and, as will be seen, she is central to Tsvetaeva's conception".

Стара песня, стара басеика.[21]

(485-94)

[Phaedra You will fly at a gallop, / I will bow to you from the branch. / Heavy is the fruit for that branch, / Heavy fruit for the branch is the anguish. Nurse It is in your brain the excrescence – / The branch. Blood and reason have quarrelled – / One half with the other. / The trunk with the diseased marrow. / Old is the song, old the refrain.]

In the third scene, *The Confession*, the story reaches its dramatic peak with Phaedra's revelation of her passion to Hippolytus and the consequent rejection that will lead the queen, immediately after his refusal, to hang herself from a myrtle branch;[22] in the fourth, *The Little Tree*, Theseus, who traditionally occupies the final part of the story, makes his appearance. The Nurse, once again the protagonist, breaks into a false accusation that Hippolytus has raped Phaedra, imagining that this will safeguard the honour of her *protégée*. The king then, invoking Poseidon, curses his son, whose chariot is run over by a bull spilled from the waters, and only the discovery of a letter, in which Phaedra tells the truth about the facts, can exonerate, though late, the guy. After the Nurse has accused herself of the terrible plot, Theseus, identifying Aphrodite as responsible for everything because of the ancient guilt of abandoning Ariadne on the island of Naxos, orders that Phaedra and Hippolytus be buried together.

As can be seen from this rapid exposition of the plot, the tragedy's focal point revolves around the peculiarity of Phaedra's love, so pure that it is compared, at the moment of confession, to a joint death wish: only by dying together, Phaedra and Hippolytus could be united in an eternal bond.[23]

[21] The Russian verses of Cvetaeva's *Phaedra* (*Федра*), quoted in this contribution, are taken from De Nardis 1990.

[22] It is worth remembering that, in Euripides, Phaedra hangs herself, not from a tree, but from a beam in the palace; furthermore, as we have said, it is she herself who accuses her stepson, having in her hand the letter containing the calumnies against him. On the other side, in Seneca's tragedy, the woman kills herself using Hippolytus' sword, since she recognises it as a sort of fetish object capable of reuniting her ideally with the beloved after death. On the myrtle plant in relation to Phaedra's story, see Paus. 1.22.2: μυρσίνη δέ ἐστι Τροιζηνίοις τὰ φύλλα διὰ πάσης ἔχουσα τετρυπημένα: φῦναι δὲ οὐκ ἐξ ἀρχῆς αὐτὴν λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἔργον γεγενῆσθαι τῆς ἐς τὸν ἔρωτα ἄσης καὶ τῆς περόνης ἣν ἐπὶ ταῖς θριξὶν εἶχεν ἡ Φαίδρα [There is a myrtle plant in Troezen that has its leaves pockmarked all over: it is said that in the beginning it was not born in this way, but that the fact derives from Phaedra's love torment and the pin in her hair.].

[23] The purity of the protagonist's feelings is the real novelty of this tragedy, since, as De Nardis writes in 1990, 10: "Cvetaeva wanted an absolutely positive character, what interested her most was the analysis of love passion: she therefore created a *Phae-*

Moreover, the suicide takes place so quickly that her love cannot be contaminated by the Nurse's subsequent lie: it can therefore remain intact in its sacredness and encourage a sort of authentic identification with the spectator.[24] In the context of this premise, therefore, it is possible to better understand the multifaceted richness of a character like the Nurse who, also on a linguistic level,[25] is coloured, unlike her chaste lady – whose adultery seems almost confined to a sort of distant vagueness –, by a torrid sexuality, repressed since the youth and now overbearingly re-emerging through her:

Кормилица
Ложь!
Оттого что лжешь
Мне, себе, ему и людям.
Я тебя вскормила грудью.
Между нами речи лишни:
Знаю, чую, вижу, слышу
Все — всех бед твоих всю залежь! —
То есть впятеро, чем знаешь
Чуешь, видишь, слышишь, хочешь
Знать.
. . .
Ты! Ведь мать тебе, ведь дочь мис!
Кроме кровного — молочный
Голос — млеку нокоримся! —
Есть: второе материнство.

dra in which it is not so important that Phaedra falls in love with Hippolytus, it is important that Phaedra falls in love, with a desperate love, destined to end dramatically. If this Phaedra is to be compared to another female character in literature, this would be Puškin's splendid Tat'jana".

[24] Thomson 1989, 343, considers this condition of participation on the part of the spectator to be directly linked to this specific characterisation of the protagonist: "In other versions Phaedra has two sons by Theseus, who endangered by her love for Hippolytus, a detail that serves to brand her as a "bad mother"; in Tsvetaeva she is childless, and the Nurse reminds her that Theseus is old and perhaps even impotent. Thus Tsvetaeva manages to arouse some sympathy for Phaedra at a purely human level, though without thereby denigrating Theseus".

[25] The language used by Cvetaeva in this tragedy is overall rich, with a balanced alternation of an archaic and high lexicon, of which Phaedra and Hippolytus are the main interpreters, and a colloquial one full of neologisms and diminutives, of which the Nurse is the expression. As Karlinsky notes 1966, 149-50: "Cvetaeva's neologisms, are always based on existing lexical material, and their aim is to convey a definite meaning to the reader, rather than to evoke in the reader a vague and undefinable association. . . The most time-honored method of producing new words used by Cvetaeva is the Russian quasi-Homeric compound adjective".

(713-22; 745-8)

> [Nurse Lies! / That you lie / To me, to yourself, to him and to the people. / I have fed you at my breast. / Between us words are superfluous: / I know, I sense, I see, I feel / Everything – every layer of all your sorrows! – / That is five times what you know, / You sense, you see, you hear, you want / To know . . . You! Yet I am your mother, yet you are my daughter! / Besides the voice of blood – the voice / Of milk – let us obey the milk! – / It exists: it is a second motherhood.]

Particularly effective from a dramaturgical point of view are the final verses just quoted, which show how the Nurse intends to replace the figure of Phaedra's mother and desperately tries to project onto her the sense of a pathological bond, to the point of a sort of perfect superimposition. It is not enough to evoke the mother's milk to recall an ancient belonging: it must even be mixed with blood.

In inducing the queen to reveal herself to Hippolytus, to confess to him the deep nature of her feelings, indicating the most suitable moment and prompting her to write a love letter, the woman shows herself to be a skilful schemer, although she cannot foresee everything, since Phaedra, upsetting the plans, will go even further and declare to her beloved that she is willing to die with him.

Cvetaeva's Nurse appears dynamic and resolute, capable, like a Shakespearean character, of constructing a dense network of deception, within which, however, Phaedra herself will end up being trapped.

And an impending *omen* of death will characterise the entire performance, reverberating in the fears of the queen who, convinced of the innocence of her love, will move as if lost on the stage, once again distancing herself from the models: in both Euripides (*Hypp.* 248-9) and Seneca (*Phaed.* 265-6), in fact, Phaedra had pursued a salvific and liberating death, able to erase a guilt and, at the same time, to put an end to her suffering.

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