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MATTEO BOSISIO*

When the Nurse Dies¹

Abstract

The article discusses the Old Nurse in Sperone Speroni's *Canace* (1542). Strong-willed and unscrupulous, she is very different from the minor figures in classical and vernacular tragedies; the innovations are mainly connected to the casual use of sources and the original way in which she expresses herself. The paper also considers Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio's objections to the tragedy in 1550, as well as the replies of Speroni (1554-1558), Felice Paciotto (1581) and Faustino Summo (1590).

KEYWORDS: Sperone Speroni; Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio; *Canace*; nurse; Renaissance tragedy; Ovid

1.

By the time Sperone Speroni wrote *Canace* between 9 January and 9 March 1542, the debate on tragedy in Italy had come of age.² The vast availability of Greek and Latin works, as well as editions of Aristotle's *Poetics* marked a turning-point for Italian tragedy.³ Gradually and not without difficulty, misunderstanding and controversy, the writers took over a long-neglected literary genre⁴ so that its noble values, powerful ideological implications, the prestige of the models adopted, and its stylistic and linguistic difficulties constituted a demanding and fascinating challenge that often led to discussion and public readings.⁵ Indeed, Trissino's *Sophonisba* was conceived and written in the various intellectual circles of Leo X's Rome (1514) (Ariani

¹ I thank Richard Bates very sincerely for the translation of the article. Finally, I express my deep gratitude to Rosy Colombo.

² On this, see Mastrocola 1998.

³ In the early sixteenth century the following original and translated versions of classical tragedy were published: one by Aeschylus (1518); three by Sophocles (1502, 1518, 1522); two by Euripides (1503, 1534); and seven by Seneca (1503, 1505, 1506, 1510, 1513, 1517, 1522). The *Poetics* was printed in 1504, 1508, 1515 and 1536 (two editions in the same year).

⁴ Dionisotti 1967, 247 rightly refers to "a literary avant-garde . . . eager to elbow its way into the future" (translation mine).

⁵ The contributions of Pieri 1989; Canova 2002; Cosentino 2003 and Gallo 2005 are of fundamental importance.

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1974, 15-39). Rucellai's *Rosmunda* (1516) and Martelli's *Tullia* (circa 1530) emerged from the pro-republican circle of the Orti Oricellari,⁶ while Giraldi Cinthio's *Orbecche*, performed in Ferrara in 1541, took shape in the sparkling atmosphere of the court of Ercole II and the Estense University (Cosentino 2003, 73-102). After them, *Canace* was the subject of much commentary at the Accademia degli Inflammati in Padua.⁷

It is no surprise, then, that experimentation with tragedy became so complex and sophisticated as to involve even minor characters and their meeting-clash with the protagonists; in particular, the status of the nurses was often reworked and modified. Already in the classical period the nurses were no longer secondary figures in tragedy and were sometimes called on to provide ethical advice, intervene or take a stand.⁸ Greta Castrucci identifies various typologies, which were often taken up and adapted in sixteenth-century works: for example, Cilissa in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and Hermione's Nurse in Euripides' *Andromache* prove to be pathetic, humble figures who suffer and despair on stage, while Phaedra's Nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus* draws on traditional wisdom: her advice, though loving and caring, is superficial and fails to reach the deep distress that is alarming her mistress. Finally, in Euripides' *Medea* – and in Seneca's plays too⁹ – the Old Nurse is unable to help, as the mistrust that separates the two women prevents any useful discussion.

Although the nurse's role can be quite important in the plays, the minor figures risk assuming a fixed, monotonous pose, and so the more alert writers in the early sixteenth century modelled the nurses with two fundamental questions in mind. On the one hand, the Aristotelian rules were to be followed for 'intermediate' figures, who should be neither excessively good nor evil (*Poet* 1452b - 1453a) (Villari 2013, 401-25). On the other, satisfying current aesthetic taste meant including in the play surprising figures, psychologically developed while also respecting the principle of *imitatio*.¹⁰

The first significant intuition on the subject can be seen in *Σωφρωνισβα*,

⁶ Cosentino 2003, 73-102.

⁷ Bruni 1967, 24-71; Tomasi 2012, 148-76 and Oberto 2017, 59-97.

⁸ On this, see Castrucci 2017.

⁹ See Tarantino's analysis 1984-1985, 53-68.

¹⁰ The link between *imitazione* ('imitation') and *diletto* ('pleasure') is explained by Speroni in his *Apologia* (Roaf 1982a, 189) in these terms: "volle egli [*scil.* the author of *Canace*] primieramente . . . che fosse antica la sua materia, acciò che, venendo in scena sì come istoria già nota, non altrimenti ci diletasse che la pittura di quelle cose che conosciamo e amiamo" ("he [the author of *Canace*] wanted above all . . . his material to be from the classics, so that, coming to the stage as a familiar story, it might please us in the same way as the painting of those things that we know and love"). All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

in which the “personaggio convenzionale e stereotipo della Nutrice” (“the conventional, stereotyped figure of the Nurse”) is replaced with “quello affettuoso e dolente di Erminia” (“the affectionate, grieving Erminia”; Cremante 2019, 40). Trissino thus seems to overcome the problem of the distance – in age and culture – between the two women, as Sofonisba’s maid is not an old nurse, but a young woman of the same age as her (“siàn nutrite insieme”, “we are nourished together”, 14).¹¹ Erminia may receive the most intimate, secret confessions of her mistress by virtue of the close relation binding her to the princess (“per amōr sōrella”, “sister through love”, 9), but her words of comfort are not based on shared experience and friendship, as she expresses herself like a classical nurse, dispensing wise thoughts through a sententious, very vague language. See 150-60, that draw on a passage of Sophocles from the *Trachiniae* (126-31) and, in particular, the famous dialogue between Achilles and Priam in Homer (*Il* 24.525-35):

Questa vita mortale
 non si può trappassar senza dolore:
 che così piacque a la giustizia eterna.
 Nè sciolta d’ogni male
 del bel ventre maternō ufciste fuore:
 che ’n statō buōnō o rēō nessun s’eterna.
 Di quel sōmmō fattōr, che ’l ciel gōverna
 appressō ciascun piede un vafō sorge;
 l’un pien di male e l’altro è pien di bene,
 e d’indi or gioja, hor pene
 trae mescolandō insieme e a noi le porge.
 (150-60)

[This mortal life / cannot be passed through without pain: / as that is what eternal justice wanted. / Nor can it be freed of all the evil / of the fair maternal womb it emerged from: / for no one enters eternity merely good or bad. / That great maker, who governs the heavens / has an urn beside each foot: / one full of ills and the other full of good, / and hence now joy, now sorrow / he extracts, mixing them together, and offers them to us.]

Rucellai’s Nurse follows another trajectory, which gives the character an innovative appearance: at first, Queen Rosmunda’s confidante seems distant from the heroine, so much so that the young woman’s forceful ardour is contrasted with the fearful attitude of the woman. Just as Ismene, in the prologue to Sophocles’ *Antigone*, begs her sister to respect Creon’s orders and refrain from seeking Polynices’ corpse (1-99), so the Nurse tries to dis-

¹¹ All quotations from *La Sofonisba*, *Rosmunda*, and *Orbecche* are from Cremante 1988.

suade the queen from retrieving the body of her father, who has been killed by Alboino. Expressions such as “unica speme al nostro regno” (“only hope of our kingdom”), “pietose man” (“piteous hands”), “fanciulla adorna e bella” (“beautiful, elegant girl”), “andar soletta” (“go alone”) give the idea of a simple, humble figure, genuinely concerned for her mistress (16, 19, 21, 23), though she can still sometimes express dissent (681): “a me non piacque questa tua risposta” (“I did not like your answer”). She destabilizes our expectations, however, through a decisive diegetic switch: at the end of the play, the character abandons her apprehensive demeanour, becoming astute and enterprising. In fact – when Rosmunda loses consciousness and clearly cannot react to Alboino’s coerciveness – she suggests Almachilde “far presto e bene queste due cose: / uccider lui e poi salvar te stesso” (1099-100, “do these two things quickly and well: / kill him and then save yourself”). Further, she does all she can to ensure the maids bring the queen help without the court becoming aware of the conspiracy against the tyrant.¹²

Orbecche is conceived along more orthodox lines: Giraldo Cinthio depicts a pathetic figure who expresses herself through constant rhetorical questions and emphatic utterances, laden with emotion and rapture (e.g. 409, 412, 415: “mi trafigete il cor”, “you pierce my heart”; “oimè misera”, “woe is me”; “tremar mi fate insino a l’ossa”, “you make me tremble to my very bones”). The Nurse does not seem wilful; often, indeed, she is unaware of what is happening on stage. The second scene of Act 5 is emblematic: though events have now taken a grim turn, she declares confidently (2587-94): “dar bando al duolo, a le querele, a i pianti. / Nel tempo più seren temete pioggia / e nel più queto mar cruda tempesta. / Gli altri nel male istesso speran bene / e con la speme si mantengon: voi / quanto più avete ben, peggio temete. / Deh piacciavi che dubbia e inutil tema / non turbi certa gioia e ver riposo” (“banish grief, lamentation and tears. / You fear rain in the fairest weather / and fierce storm in the calmest sea. / Others hope for good in evil itself / and sustain themselves with hope: you / when you have the best, fear the worst. / Come, let not such a doubtful and futile subject / disturb certain joy and true repose”). By contrast, Martelli’s *Tullia* examines the bond between nurse and heroine: the latter meditates killing her parents to assuage her furious longing for vengeance. The Nurse, as in Seneca’s tragedies, cannot thwart the queen, but in some disturbing passages seems willing to assist her.¹³

¹² The writer’s choice seems genuinely significant, as the sources – Paolo Diacono (*Historia Langobardorum*) and Boccaccio (*De casibus virorum illustrium*), for example – attribute the plan to Rosmunda. On the main strategies, see Pieri 1980, 96-113; Cosentino 2003 and Gallo 2005, 67-97.

¹³ For example, 759-70, quoted from Spera 1998 are representative: “Tullia, io ’l farò per contentarti; voi / tacete. O Dio, chi vive ha pur talora / ond’ei molto paventi, et ogni etate / ha pur qualche valore. A pena credo / ch’io potessi altro far che questo, ond’io

2.

Speroni was well aware of all these antecedents (ancient and vernacular) when he wrote the part of the Nurse in *Canace*. We should first note that the nurse is fully part of Speroni's project of renewing tragedy:¹⁴ as we know, *Canace's* bold solutions prompted the heart-felt criticism of Giraldo Cinthio (*Giudizio*, dated 1543, but printed in 1550);¹⁵ Speroni defended himself in his *Apologia* (unfinished and revised several times in the period up to 1554) and in the *Lezioni* he held at the Accademia degli Elevati in 1558.¹⁶ The debate between the two poets did not abate, still less die away:¹⁷ in support of Speroni were the voices of the philosopher Felice Paciotto in his *Risposta* – the long missive was sent to the dramatist in 1581¹⁸ – and Faustino Summo's *Discorso* (published in 1590),¹⁹ while Giraldo's accusations were backed up in 1558 by the *Epistola latina*.²⁰ In the following sections, then, we shall analyse the central, *sui generis* figure of the nurse in *Canace*, who stands out so markedly from the minor characters of his previous works; Speroni's innovations not only involved diegesis, but also the casual use of sources and style with which the old woman expresses herself. We shall also examine Giraldo's objections and the replies of Speroni, Paciotto and Summo.

The nurse is not the only servant in the work, as the play also figures the maidservant of Deiopea (mother of the protagonists *Canace* and *Macareo*).

/ consolassi costei con molta offesa / de la madre e del padre. Or perché deggio / negar questo a colei che più che figlia / è da me amata, e ch'io spero ch'un giorno / sia degli affanni miei dolce riposo, / ov'or son serva? Ahi, questa servitute / i giovin forti inaspra e i vecchi stanca" ("Tullia, I'll do it to satisfy you; / be silent. Oh God, in life we sometimes have / cause for great fear, and every age / has some value too. I hardly believe / I could do other than this, whereby / I might console her, so much offended / by her mother and father. Now why must I / deny this to her who more than a daughter / is loved by me, and whom I hope one day / may be a sweet resting place for my labours, / where now I am a servant? Ah, this servitute / sharpens the young and strong and tires the old").

¹⁴ On *Canace* see especially, Canova 2002, 53-98; Ventricelli 2007, 53-76; Lavocat 2008, 45-57, and Maslanka Soro 2010, 35-44.

¹⁵ Quoted from Roaf 1982c, 95-159.

¹⁶ They are published in Roaf 1982a, 183-99, and Roaf 1982b, 207-46.

¹⁷ For a detailed reconstruction, see Weinberg 1961, 912-53; Roaf 1989, 169-91, and Jossa 1996, 23-138.

¹⁸ Paciotti was in the service of Emanuele Filiberto of Savoia and corresponded with Bernardo and Torquato Tasso. I quote the *Risposta* from Dalle Laste and Forcellini 1740a, 226-33.

¹⁹ For the biography of Summo, a scholar of rhetoric and poetics, see Selmi 2001, 505-34, and 2007, 185-202. The *Discorso* is quoted from Dalle Laste and Forcellini 1740b, 234-73.

²⁰ On the *Epistola* see Gallo 2019a, 233-63.

She gives adamant expression to traditional morality: much of her monologue in 510-46 takes up that of the nurse in *Orbecche* (552-663), interwoven with many gnomic references. The maidservant, who considers her mistress's dream carefully, is then able to calm the queen with her resolute, rhetorically incisive speech (Ruggirello 2005, 385-7). She displays, for example, notable awareness, and glosses Deiopea's errors of judgment thus ("ciò proprio sarebbe / voler farvi infelice / senza infelicitade", "that would really mean / wanting to make you unhappy / without unhappiness", 484-6).²¹ Nevertheless, the maid prefers to keep some dark omens to herself, so as to save the queen further worry (543-6): "né son senza paura / che 'l suo strano temer fuor di ragione / sia quasi come augurio / d'alcuna rea ventura" ("nor am I unafraid / that his strange, irrational fear / is almost an augury / of some guilty destiny"). The female figure seems empathetic, in tune with her mistress: she does not deny the reasons for Deiopea's dismay, but still tries to circumvent them to prevent her suffering. Also, the argumentative rigour she demonstrates is only a reflection of her experience: her real thoughts are communicated in soliloquy during which we discover a multi-faceted, changing personality.

Despite this, the most innovative features concern the nurse, who in 659-708 is intent on talking to Macareo for the first time. The woman is not seeking an unspeakable secret, not is she trying to console her master or interpret his nightmares, as she seems aware of the intrigue: the nurse knows, that is, that Macareo and Canace, the children of Eolo and Deiopea, have long been enjoying an incestuous relationship; in addition, she takes on the task of helping her mistress, "trafitta" ("pierced") by labour pains and anguished at the thought of being unable to hide the birth (665). Indeed, the traditional role of the nurse as the diligent and naturally subordinate confidante seems inverted: it is the woman who asks Macareo's aid and not the opposite (661). In addition, the nurse does not have the usual task of restraining the protagonist's ardour in seeking to reach a bold and noble goal: on the contrary, she vigorously urges her master not to seem "dolente a sconsigliato" ("remorseful and rash") and "vile" ("mean"), and not to be conditioned by "vergogna" ("shame"; 663, 670, 676). Canace needs her brother, who neglects his duties as husband and future father.²² The "speme stanca" ("tired hope") described by the nurse depicts an insecure figure who spends his days "sospirando" ("sighing"; 669, 671). Yet, while the nurse does "tutto ciò" ("everything") in her power to solve the complicated situation, Macareo by contrast seems impotent (678). His passivity – not the incest – is the "col-

²¹ All quotations from Speroni's *Canace* are from Cremante 1988.

²² Note that in Epistle 11 of Ovid's *Heroides*, Speroni's main source, Macareus flees his father's palace in panic.

pa” (“fault”) that could even bring about Canace’s death (676). His response sounds naive and unrealistic, as he wants to confess the truth to his father Eolo and then take his own life: the nurse brings out the selfish nature of the character, who is not thinking about his sister at all. Canace would be ready to kill herself if Macareo died, and he does not consider her authentic, boundless love for him; the proof is incisively provided in 704-8 (“sol per piacerti / contra ’l proprio piacere uccider volse / quella santa onestade / di cui qual donna è priva / né donna è più né viva”; “only to please you / against her own pleasure she wanted to kill / that sacred virtue / without which no woman / is either woman or alive”).²³

This is followed by the nurse’s long monologue (709-60), which displays the character’s psychology in great detail. Left alone after the premature deaths of her husband and son (713-15), she has served the royal family for years. Though attached to Macareo and Canace, she can still call them “sciocchi” (“fools”) and “nemici” (“enemies”) (709). Her emotions are ambiguous, piercing, full of passion (722-4): “da una vita innocente / alla infamia / degli altrui mancamenti”; (“from an innocent life / to the infamy of the failings of others”). Though torn and divided between her love for the brother and sister (728-9: “pietade / della miseria extrema”, “pity for extreme misery”) and her duties to Eolo, she does not indulge in invoking a cruel fate or in moralistic judgments: this is what perplexed some of the audience, who found themselves watching a tragedy that breaks the moral code, but whose protagonists – though “scellerati” (“wicked”) and “malvagi” (“evil”) – are presented with sympathy.²⁴ Nor is the nurse the voice of Christian morality or

²³ This sententious passage is recalled in *Il libro della bella donna* by Federico Luigini (1554). In the treatise a company of Friulian nobles describe over three days the characteristics of the perfect woman. I quote from Zonta 1913, 283: “primieramente adunque le sarà in cura ed in protezione, vie più che cosa del mondo, il suo onore e la sua castità, altissimo e singolarissimo pregio di ciascheduna donna, della quale qualunque per mala sua sorte priva resta, né donna è più, né viva, si come ci avisa Laura nel sonetto “Cara la vita”, e la nutrice di Macareo presso allo Sperone nella tragedia intitolata *Canace*” (“first, then, she will take care to protect, more than anything else in the world, her honour and chastity, the highest and most singular treasure of any woman, as Laura tells us in the sonnet “Cara la vita” and Macareo’s nurse in Speroni’s tragedy entitled *Canace*”).

²⁴ See Giraldi Cinthio’s judgments in Roaf 1982c, 98: “se bene la Tragedia è di cose terribili e miserabili, non deve però essere introdotta in essa persona scelerata su la quale debba nascere l’orrore e la commiserazione. Perché qual misericordia può nascere nell’animo delli spettatori da una persona scelerata, la quale per sua malvagità incorra nelle infelicitadi e nelle miserie?” (“though Tragedy deals with terrible, wretched events, it should not include an evil character who ought to arouse a sense of horror and commiseration. For what pity can arise in the soul of the audience for an evil person, whose wickedness leads to unhappiness and misery?”).

the loyal representative of Eolo's *Realpolitik*. Of course, Macareo and Canace are "inonesti" ("morally wrong", 737); but "lor verde etade" ("their callow youth") mitigates any judgment (731). Aware of the serious risks she runs, she comments on the affair with composure:

Lo star fermo, il fuggire,
 la difesa, l'offesa,
 il parlare, il tacere,
 lo scoprire, il coprire,
 è una istessa rovina.
 Dunque faccia a suo modo
 di me e di suoi figli
 Eolo padre e signore:
 ferma sono io di fare
 del mio debito amore e della fede,
 che io porto al mio signore e alla mia donna,
 quanto arò di potere e di consiglio,
 lor vita e lor onore.
 (748-60)

[Remaining, fleeing, / defence, offence, / speech, silence, / revealing, concealing, / all lead to ruin. / So do as you please / with me and your children / Eolo father and lord: / I am resolved to use / of the proper love and loyalty / that I bear my lord and my lady, / what power and wisdom I have, / for their life and their honour.]

The syncopated rhythm of the *settenari* (verses with the main stress on the sixth syllable), the frequent internal and middle rhymes, the rhythmical pauses, alliteration and consonance are the basis of a significant melic and Petrarchian reform of the metrics of tragedy.²⁵ The nurse's artificial, polished *elocutio* describes a woman in conflict with herself, but, at the same time, ready to face her destiny. Remarkably, the constant use of rhyme, bringing "dolcezza" ("sweetness") and "armonia" ("harmony"), and the *settenario* – suited to "piacevolezza" ("pleasantness") according to the greatest Renaissance scholars²⁶ – aims at a more subtle form, mediated by *gravitas*: the nurse's language is not solemn, yet the thinness of her speech – broken, suspended, deferred – can dig down into the intimate depths of a fragile, dramatically split inner life.²⁷ The desire to provoke, breaking with Trissino's

²⁵ On this aspect, see Ariani 1977, 79-140; Cremante 2003a, 201-13; 2003b, 123-59 and Huss 2019, 55-104.

²⁶ Roaf 1982c, 135 and 132. On the subject, see Afribo 2002.

²⁷ Stylistically, the effect is also guaranteed by the repeated use of antithesis, on which see this passage from Speroni's *Dialogo della retorica*, printed in Pozzi 1978a, 666: "ma veramente quella [scil. 'antitesi' in Petrarca] era cosa maravigliosa, e degna cer-

and Giraldi's unrhymed hendecasyllables, seems self-evident:²⁸ calm, austere characters are replaced by troubled, unsettling figures. We can also glimpse in the background a different conception of tragedy and literature: while Giraldi Cinthio aimed at instruction of the audience and catharsis – guaranteed by immersion in the work (Roaf 1982c, 98) – Speroni prefers to move the reader to compassion.²⁹

3.

The nurse returns to the stage after Canace's soliloquy: her exchange with her mistress is so close-packed (801-968) that Giraldi commented sarcastically and contemptuously on the scene.³⁰ Actually, though objectively the confrontation goes on too long, it reveals certain significant aspects of the nurse's character. Once again, the epithets used in 801-2 about Canace ("meschina", "wretched"; "furia", "fury") to describe her conduct ("sciocchezza",

to di dovere essere con diligenza osservata, che tai contrarii e tai voci, quasi fila della sua tela, in tessendo la orazione sono ordite in maniera che né aspre per la strettezza né troppo molli o allargate, ma salde, piane e eguali per ogni parte stanno insieme le sue iunture: il che è tanto maggior virtù, quanto men della prosa i nostri versi volgari, alle lor rime legati, son tenuti di adoprarla" ("but truly it ['antithesis' in Petrarch] was a wonderful thing, and certainly worth having diligently observed, for these contraries and these words, almost threads of its web, in weaving the speech they are planned so that they are neither harsh for their concision nor too soft or extended, but their combinations hold firm together and equal in every part: which is all the greater a virtue, as our vernacular verses, tied to their rhymes, are less obliged to adopt it than prose").

²⁸ Speroni in Roaf 1982a, 195: "in ogni lingua quello di tutti i versi dovrebbe esser più tragico che più è atto a imitare i nostri alterni ragionamenti, ché ciò è il proprio della tragedia: e quello a ciò fare è più atto, il quale in favellando a vicenda, spesse fiato, senza alcun studio, formiamo, quasi all'uomo sia naturale la testura di cotal verso. E tale è il giambo e l'eptassillabo, quello in Grecia, questo in Italia, e non l'esametro e l'endecasillabo" ("in every language, the most tragic meter should be the one most fitted to imitate our varying reasonings, for that is the one natural to tragedy: and the one most fitted to do this, the one we often formulate speaking to each other, without preparation, almost as if the texture of this verse is natural to man. And such is the iamb and the heptasyllable, and not the hexameter and the hendecasyllable").

²⁹ Cosentino 2019, 140: "starting from Speroni's *Canace* and going back to its model in Euripides, onto which is grafted, let us remember, the powerful voice of Ovid's *Heroides*, Renaissance tragedy gradually makes the world of feelings and passions its own: traditional catharsis is thus replaced with a painful and involved *compassio* that, in the end, can only recognize the desperate power of *eros*" (translation mine).

³⁰ Roaf 1982c, 121: "la nutrice la [*scil.* Canace] tiene tanto in chiacchiera su la scena ch'avria potuto partorire un uomo armato" ("the nurse keeps her [Canace] talking so long onstage that she could have given birth to an armed man").

“folly”) are not a moral judgment, but a criticism of her action, as the heroine has rashly left her quarters. After Canace’s recriminations, the nurse incites her to trust to “conforti veri” (“true sources of consolation”, 836), but her argument does not rest on theoretical advice detached from specific problems, which would be typical of many traditional confidantes (notably *Orbecche*). On the contrary, she shows that Canace must remain clearheaded, as the old woman has taken the situation in hand. Just as the nurse in Rucellai, when Rosmunda faints, organizes the plan to eliminate Alboino, so Canace’s nurse takes the place of her mistress during her pregnancy. The woman’s responsibility is total (837-8): “il partito che io presi / di celare il tuo parto” (“the decision I took / to conceal your childbirth”). The contrast between ‘I’ and ‘you’ encapsulates the nurse’s absolute freedom of manoeuvre as she handles a delicate and dangerous situation alone and working wholly on her own initiative: so, the character never seems distant from her mistress or vice versa. Often in ancient and vernacular tragedies there is an underlying lack of communication, a conflict between the young heroines and the nurses: but in *Canace* the nurse seems so dynamic that she compensates the princess’s weaknesses and limitations. The two figures complete and reflect each other in a single tragic dimension.

The nurse bases her argument on tangible experience that justifies a deductive, reassuring approach (839-45): “or se per mio consiglio nello spazio / di diece mesi interi / della tua gravidezza / non sono accorti ancora uomini o dei, / perché sperar non dèi / che io possa altrui coprire / l’ora del partorire?” (“now if, following my advice, in the course / of ten whole months, / your pregnancy / neither men nor gods have yet noticed, / why should you not hope / that I can cover / the hour of another’s childbirth?”). Not only does the nurse insist on her formidable capacity to dominate the scene, but also – with a touch of vainglory – on the wiles she has deployed. Further, Canace’s resignation, fearing Eolo’s vengeance, is countered by the nurse’s unprincipled insistence. The balsam to soothe her mistress’s pain will come from the “face amorosa” (“loving torch”) and the “fiamme onnipotenti” (“all-powerful flames”), which can even force themselves “oltre il giusto e l’onesto / d’ogni legge e costume” (“beyond what is right and honest / in every law and custom”, 856, 859, 863-4). The incestuous feeling, which was unacceptably depraved for some contemporary readers, becomes a call to action, a wholly permissible expression of vitality.³¹ The nurse’s choice of sides proves both

³¹ The objections of the *Giudizio* (“Canace si chiama tante volte da sé scelerata, degna di morte, e ella stessa narra il congiugnimento disonesto con suo fratello con sì poca vergogna, che basterebbe questo a porla in odio e in dispetto a tutto il mondo? Che terribile puote quindi o per morte o per altro caso venire? Che pietà? Che maraviglioso? In che parte muovere compassione?”; “Canace calls herself wicked and worthy of death many times, and she herself describes the shameful union with her brother with so lit-

understandable and disturbing: her reproaches to brother and sister now dissolve into a sort of benediction of their tie. The feeling seems irrepressible and necessary, to the point of being put on the same level in the *Apologia* as that of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* 5 and the protagonists of the 4th day of the *Decameron*.³²

Canace's worries are not exhausted; and so the nurse advances further considerations, drawing on an iron, objective logic. Her mistress, ready to kill herself before the birth of her child so as to preserve her honour, does not think that Eolo would in any case discover her pregnancy.³³ The challenging proposal, which anticipates later developments (894: "moriàn secretamente", "we will die in secret") reveals how much the heroine's fate depends on that of her confidante. Fear, then, needs to be turned into a stimulus – paradox-

tle shame, that would not this alone be enough to make her loathed and despised by the whole world? What else more terrible, then, can befall her either through death or some other event? What pity? What wonder? Where does it move our compassion?), are answered in the *Apologia*: "gli errori degli amanti non sono sceleratezze, ma si debbano chiamar umani, perché l'uomo ama come ragionevole e perciò umanamente pecca; e se così è che l'error de gli innamorati sia umano, adonque noi semo nella particola di Aristotele dove dice che persone tragiche sono quelle che *non per dedecus et pravitatem sed humano quodam errore in infelicitatem lapsi sunt*"; ("the lovers' errors are not wickedness, but should be called human, as it is reasonable for a man to love and so, humanly, sin; and if the lovers' error is thus human, then we are in Aristotle's category where he says that tragic figures are those who *non per dedecus et pravitatem sed humano quodam errore in infelicitatem lapsi sunt*"). I quote from Roaf 1982c, 121 and 1982b, 228.

³² This strained interpretation is underlined by Faustino Summo, though he supports the innovations of *Canace* (Dalle Laste and Forcellini 1740b, 251, 267, 272): "in vero molto debilmente, benché con qualche verità, fu provato dall'opponente nel suo *Giudicio*, che le persone dei due fratelli introdotti siano scelerate. . . In Dante poi quel caso di Paolo e Francesca è veramente caso amoroso imprudentemente accaduto per occasione di quella lettura, tra solo e sola, e tra lontani di sangue, benché cugnati tra di loro. Perché la sceleraggine nel peccato della carne non ha luogo, se non tra padre e figliuola, tra figliuolo e madre e tra fratello e sorella. . . Alle autorità del Boccaccio con gran facilità si risponde, che tutti quei delitti son lontani da sceleraggine, e tutti dependono da imprudenzia, e son fatti per umano errore, e sono peccati d'incontinenzia e d'amore e tutti tragici" ("it was proved by his opponent in his *Giudicio*, actually very weakly, though with a little truth, that the figures of the brother and sister introduced are wicked. . . And in Dante the example of Paolo and Francesca is really an example of love, which imprudently happened during that reading, with no other person present, between two people distantly related though also brother- and sister-in-law. . . Boccaccio's authority is easily answered, for all those crimes are far removed from wickedness, and all depend on imprudence, and are done through human error, and are sins of incontinence and love and all of them tragic").

³³ Note that their suicidal intentions – counterproductive and impulsive – suggest two immature, feckless personalities.

ical but decisive – to overcome the terrible impasse (900): “voglio che ami la morte” (“I want you to love death”). After all, the nurse’s certainties seem broadly solid and beyond discussion (905, 907-9): “sono io ben certa di dover fuggire” (“I am fully certain I must flee”) and “col mio consiglio / se a me credevi, avea fatto sicuri / te, il fratello e il figlio” (“with my advice / if you believed me, you would have made safe / yourself, your brother and your son”). The following lines emphasize the nurse’s certainty: “speme” (“hope”) and, especially, “ragione” (“reason”) are the only tools for outdoing adversity (922). In addition, the modest support that nurses often give to tragedies seems decisive in *Canace*: she claims to have long safeguarded the young woman’s “vita” (“life”) and “onore” (“honour”, 929), and, proud and intrepid, asserts that her advice “non han fallito” (“has not failed”) and nor “falliran” (“will it fail”, 932-3). The heroine – lethargic, only half herself, as little astute as Macareo – seems inseparable from the nurse: the limitations of brother and sister are made up for by the woman’s vigour and energy,³⁴ rejecting Canace’s reiterated protests, to whom she promises (958-9): “disperata o sicura, / son certa di salvarti” / “desperate or safe, / I am certain to save you”).

4.

In the following scene the nurse is still at the centre of the drama: we should underline that the incestuous relation of the protagonists is prior to the action – recalled at the outset by the Shade in 2-5 – while brother and sister make no significant choices in the heart of the tragedy. Far from being a marginal figure, who simply converses with her masters while remaining in her place, the old woman is constantly taking action, crossing the confines of her traditional status. In effect, the development of the story becomes wholly her responsibility, as she convinces the characters to carry out her carefully conceived plans. Later, shown talking to Deiopea, she advances her strategy using her natural talents for feigning and dissembling. The queen calls her “fedele” (“loyal”) at 974,³⁵ emphasizing the author’s antiphrastic intention, throwing light on the figure’s untrustworthy, calculating nature. The mistress notes that the nurse is carrying a basket, in which Canace’s child

³⁴ This aspect is part of Speroni’s strategy to mitigate the atypical nature of the protagonists. Their love is not intentional, but the result of Venus’ vendetta against Eolo, who is guilty of having thwarted Aeneas’ voyage (20-9). *Canace*’s detractors criticize this piece of mythological *combinatio* (Roaf 1982c, 107-9): in fact, the story derives partly from Ovid and partly from Virgil (*Aen.* 1.50-80).

³⁵ Note that at the outset of *Canace* Deiopea uses no positive epithet to refer to the maidservant.

will later be hidden. The nurse seems unembarrassed by Deiopea's questions about the basket, pretending she wants to fill it with flowers to offer to Juno.

It is worth noting that the nurse already played a considerable part in Speroni's source: in the eleventh epistle of the *Heroides* the nurse realizes that Canace loves her brother ("prima malum nutrix animo praesensit anili, / prima mihi nutrix 'Aeoli, – dixit, – 'amas!'", 35-6).³⁶ She then tries in vain to bring on an abortion for her mistress through unguents and medical procedures (41-6). Later, she prevents Canace from telling her parents the truth in an intense passage ("nec tenui vocem. 'Quid, – ait, tua crimina prodis?' / Oraque clamantis conscia pressit anus. / Quid faciam infelix? Gemitus dolor edere cogit, / sed timor et nutrix et pudor ipse vetant. / Contineo gemitus elapsaque verba represso / et cogor lacrimas combibere ipsa meas", 51-6). These episodes are not part of the tragedy as they take place in a phase preceding the beginning of the *fabula*; Speroni retrieves and enhances the nurse's unusual character, but imagines a very different scenario for her.

This is confirmed in the monologue, where the nurse is again centre-stage:

Queste secrete imprese, onde dipende
la salute e l'onore
delle donne gentili, da non molti
vogliono essere intese e a consumarle
pochi non son bastanti.
Però sempre son piene
di perigli diversi e di fatiche,
di paure e di pene.
Or per nullo accidente
non mi dovrei partire
da questa poverella
che già è in partorire.
Ma perciò che io son sola et è mestieri
che io provegga per tutto,
qui sono et ad un tempo
gli occhi volgo alla strada e ad ogni suono
che quinci entro si sente
porgo l'orecchie intente.
(1013-30)

[The health and honour / of gentlewomen, are not to be known of / by many
and to perform them / few are insufficient. / But they are always full / of
various dangers and labours, / fears and pains. / Now no incident / will make
me leave / this poor woman / who is now about to give birth. / But as I am

³⁶ I quote from Bornecque 1928. The tragic weight of the epistle is examined by Williams 1992, 201-9; Philippides 1996, 426-39, and Casali 1998, 700-10.

alone and it is my duty / to take care of everything, / here I am and at times /
I turn my eyes to the road and at every sound / that is heard in here / I bend
my straining ears.]

One is astonished how casually she first tries to reduce the story of Canace and Macareo to an incident – delicate, but not rare – in court life, only to go on to praise her diplomatic offensive. Her swift work in protecting her masters from imminent danger seems extraordinary.³⁷ She may be on her own (“pochi non son bastanti”, “few are insufficient”), “io son sola” (“I am alone”), “io provegga per tutto” (“it is my duty / to take care of everything”) but she has a reckless, titanic strength (“perigli diversi”, “various dangers”; “fatiche”, “labours”; “paure”, “fears”; “pene”, “pains”). One might almost think from this passage that the real tragic hero of *Canace* is the nurse. This would not be a mere impression, as it is supported mathematically: the nurse is given 256 lines out of a total of 2069, equal to 12%; Macareo has 217, and Canace 108 (plus 45 of a speech reported by the minister in the last act). The only character given more is Eolo (395). To which one might add that the work is divided in two essential parts: in the first the nurse has 24% of the lines (1-1074); the second is dominated by the tyrannical figure of Eolo, who has 25% of the lines (1075-2069). And if we count the words used by the nurse the result is interesting: out of more than 500 lexemes the most frequent are “onore” (“honour”, 7 times), “vita” (“life”, 7), “parto” (“childbirth”, 6), “amor” and “amore” (“love”, 5), “porto” (“refuge”, 5), “salute” (“health”, 5), “core” (“heart”, 4), “morte” (“death”, 4) and “timore” (“fear”, 4). It is almost as if in the Nurse’s speech the watchwords of the tragic heroes are made to react with the domestic, everyday vocabulary of the servants.

The unusual mixture of passion and protectiveness emerges in the nurse’s dialogue with the servant: the expressions in 1044-6 “tu m’empierai [*scil.* la cesta]” (“you will fill [the basket] for me”), “e piena” (“it is full”), “quanto più tosto poi” (“as soon as possible”), delineate a vigorous, impatient figure. Her impulsiveness, however, is tempered by her blind faith in her abilities: “in nissuna altra guisa / posso sicuramente / trarre il parto futuro / della sua cameretta” (“in no other way / can I safely / take the future birth / from its room”, 1058-61). As soon as the servant is left alone on the stage he praises the nurse’s stratagem, which enables her to nonchalantly conceal “con poca fatica . . . / un immenso errore” (“with little effort . . . a huge error”, 1096-7). Note that Speroni himself in his *Apologia* underlines the nurse’s cunning;³⁸

³⁷ The passage is innovative as often in the monologues the nurses and maids openly state what they cannot confide to their mistresses.

³⁸ Roaf 1982a, 190: “l famiglio di Macareo, con sua grandissima meraviglia, loda lei [*scil.* la balia] che facilmente trovasse un modo non più pensato onde ascondesse quel parto, che ’l celarlo lunga fiata parve a lui e al patrone impossibile” (“Macareo’s ser-

he comments on the episode directly, defending himself from Giraldu's criticism of the implausibility of the expedient of the basket (Roaf 1982c, 120). Actually, Speroni took it from Ovid (69-71), though Eolo's discovery of the deception is different: in the *Heroides* it all happens very quickly ("iam prope limen erat; patrias vagitus ad auris / venit et indicio proditur ille suo. / Eripit infantem mentitaque sacra revelat / Aeolus; insana regia voce sonat", 73-6), while *Canace* abounds in dramatic details, designed to raise narrative tension: the nurse at first seems to be succeeding in removing the basket with the baby from the palace, until Eolo calls her to him so as to admire the flowers. The nurse – described by the servant with increasing touches of *pàthos* ("infelice", "wretched"; "poverella, vinta dal timore / tal si fe' nell'aspetto, / quale ella era nel core", "poor woman, overcome by fear / showed in her face, / what she was in her heart"; "nel viso / una lunga tragedia", "in her face / a long tragedy", 1200, 1205-7, 1211-12) – resists her master's insistent requests, but is at last forced to give way in a scene throbbing with excited feeling, which should be read in full:

Giunta davanti al re, pur ebbe tanto
 di vigore e d'ardire
 che ella gli poteo dire,
 pregando umilmente, che nissuno
 non toccasse o movesse alcuna cosa
 di quel sacro presente, in cotal modo
 dalle vergini mani di Canace
 formato e consecrato
 all'alma dea Giunone.
 Così guardato alquanto e comendato
 il presente e la figlia
 da Eolo e Deiopea,
 la nutrice infelice con licenzia
 d'ambidue lor levossi; et apprestata
 per tornar verso me, quel miserello
 che giacea nella cesta e insin allora
 forse aveva dormito, alzò un gran strido,
 forte piangendo. A questo
 la dolente reina,
 trista e certa indovina
 di quel che era e di quel che esser dovea,
 perduta ogni virtute, nelle braccia
 del suo fiero marito

vant, to his great surprise, praises her [the nurse] who easily found an unthought-of way of hiding the birth, for it seemed to him and his master impossible to conceal it for so long").

rimase trammortita.
 Egli primeramente,
 muto dallo stupore,
 Mirava or la reina
 che era meno venuta, or la nutrice
 peggio che morta, pallida e tremante
 e che avea non di donna
 ma di sasso semiante.
 Ma poi che lo stupore,
 lo qual da gli alti cor tosto si parte,
 diede luogo al furore
 e il viso, che pareo
 cener, si fe' di foco,
 scordato della sua divinitade
 e del reale stato,
 sospinta la reina
 che gli era in braccio e presa per le trecchie
 la nutrice con l'una,
 con l'altra man la cesta,
 corse alla cameretta
 della figliuola: quivi
 con lor si riserrò, lasciando piena
 la sala di persone e le persone
 ripiene di dolore,
 di stupore e d'orrore
 (1214-61)

[When she came before the king, she had such / energy and boldness / that
 she could tell him, / humbly begging, that no one / should touch or move any-
 thing / of that sacred present, in such a way / from the virgin hands of Canace
 / formed and consecrated / to the great goddess Juno. / When the present and
 their daughter / had been looked at much and praised / by Eolo and Deiopea,
 / the wretched nurse with permission / of both took it from them; and about
 / to come back to me, the poor wretch / that lay in the basket and till then
 / perhaps had slept, raised a great cry, / sobbing loudly. At this / the woeful
 queen, / sad and certain guessed / what it was and what it must be, / losing
 all her strength, in the arms / of her imperious husband / was stunned. / He
 at first, / dumb with wonder, / gazed now at the queen / who had fainted, now
 at the nurse / worse than dead, pale and trembling / and that seemed not a
 woman / but a stone to resemble. / But since wonder, / which quickly leaves
 noble hearts, / gave way to fury / and the face, that seemed / ashen, became
 enflamed, / forgotten his divinity / and his kingship, / he pushed aside the
 queen / who was in his arms and taking by her locks / the nurse with one
 hand, / with the other hand the basket, / ran to the room / of his daughter:

here / he locked himself in with them, leaving full / the hall with people and
the people / filled with grief, / with wonder and with horror.]

The account is genuinely involving, as the audience follows the agitated reactions of the protagonists through the servant's incredulous eyes, which shift from one figure to the other. The broken, rhyming versification expresses the characters' confusion in the face of an unexpected event. Equally, the complex rhyme system links the lines to each other in a dramatic, disconcerting sing-song. The nurse's "vigore" ("energy") and "ardire" ("boldness") are again balanced with the humble prayers to her masters: her confident, respectful manner seems to get the better of the sovereigns' demands. Nevertheless, the baby's crying brings her plan to nought: in the course of a few lines Deiopea's dismay at her husband's initial helplessness leads on to the servant's surrender, for the first time seeming impotent and terrified. The tone becomes darker and grimmer: Eolo's *furor* bursts out suddenly in all its vehemence against the nurse, there is a physical clash between the two characters, while Macareo and Canace – figures far removed from the typical characteristics of the just, innocent hero opposing a bloody tyrant – kill themselves without ever making direct contact with their father. Our attention finally turns to the courtiers: their confusion is fully shared by the reader and suspends for a moment the narrative flow, raising the level of suspense.

5.

The king's cruel revenge, which is already evident from his dragging the nurse by the hair into Canace's rooms, is not long coming. Eolo orders the counsellor to strangle his grandchild and to bring his daughter and the nurse a knife and poison with which they can do away with themselves (1367-99).³⁹

³⁹ The passage may draw on *Decameron* 5.7. Though based on Ovid, the tale has a happy ending: Messer Amerigo is "salito in furore" ("filled with rage") and "fiero" ("furious") when he discovers his daughter Violante has given birth to a child. His wife plays the part of the nurse and tries in vain to hide the baby, whereupon Amerigo orders a servant (§ 30): "va' . . . alla Violante e sì le dì da mia parte che prestamente prenda qual vuole l'una di queste due morti, o del veleno o del ferro . . . e fatto questo, piglierai il figliuolo pochi dì fa da lei partorito e, percossogli il capo al muro, il gitta a mangiare a' cani" (go . . . to Violante and tell her from, me that she take at once one of these two ways to die as she prefers, either poison or the sword . . . and when you have done this, you are to take the child she bore a few days ago and, when you have dashed its head against the wall, throw it to the dogs to eat"). I quote from Quondam, Alfano and Fiorilla 2013, 905.

Thus, Canace and the nurse both deserve to die as equally guilty: the two women (and the baby) share a single fate. Eolo himself, after all, repeats the idea at 1559-61: “in tanto la nutrice, / sua fedel consiglieria, e quel suo figlio / le faran compagnia” (“meanwhile the nurse, / her faithful counseller, and her child / will keep her company”). The symbiosis between the characters, now crystal clear, is continued right up to the dual suicide, which the minister describes in detail to Macareo:

Quale arrivi,
 tale ti aspettava io; ma se di questo
 mio figliuolo innocente,
 che altri mai non offese se non forse
 me meschina e sé stesso,
 vieni a prender vendetta, per pietade
 piacciati d'indugiarla
 almen fin che io sia morta,
 sì che mi passi il core
 quel tuo coltello e non questo dolore.
 Vòlta alla sua nutrice,
 levata a lamentarsi:
 fede, disse, et amor di cotai doni
 non soleano esser degni
 né son per aventura.
 Par così al re: e se così gli pare,
 moriamo volentieri,
 tu per esser fedele, io per amare.
 (1756-73)

[Whatever may happen, / I expected it from you; but if this / innocent child of mine, / who never harmed others, if not perhaps / my wretched self and himself, / you come to avenge yourself on, for pity's sake / may it please you to delay it / at least until I am dead, / so that sword of yours / may cut my heart, but not this grief. / She turned to her nurse, / who had risen to lament: / loyalty, she said, and love of such gifts / are not usually worthy / nor are they so by chance. / For the king it is so: and if that is so for him, / let us die willingly, / you for your loyalty, I for my love.]

We should add that Giraldi himself recognizes how good this scene is,⁴⁰ with

⁴⁰ Roaf 1982c, 156: “egli è vero che quelle parole che fa Canace prima che s’uccida (non considerata la qualità della persona che le dice) potrian lasciare un poco di affetto nel cuore di chi l’udisse, che sono tolte da buon luoco e da chi sapeo che cosa era muovere a pietade e a compassione” (“it is true that those words Canace utters before killing herself (without regard to the quality of the person speaking) may leave some feeling in the listener’s heart, for they come from a good place and from one who knew

its extremely moving female sensibility.⁴¹ Her love for her child, as immense as it is despairing, becomes a very touching protective impulse that reminds the modern reader of the episode, in some ways similar, of Cecilia's mother in *I Promessi sposi* (chap. 34). In addition, the bond with the nurse is condensed into the apodictic phrase with which Canace seems to instil courage in the nurse on the basis of the shared fate they must face;⁴² thus, even death cannot separate the two women, bound together by an imperishable tie. According to Giraldi, the literary problem of the passage consists, if anything, in the nurse's disappearance, out of keeping with sixteenth-century aesthetic taste:

è indegna per la sua bassezza di morire in Tragedia; nella quale non avvengono se non morti di gran maestri, non di servi o di serve, o d'umili famigliari; il che potete giudicare dall'esempio de' Greci e de' Latini e dalla stessa diffinizione della Tragedia che voi avete da Aristotile. Né importa qui che non sia riferita in scena la morte della nutrice, perché molte volte appresso i Tragici si accennan sol le morti de' scelerati, di maniera che, senza che della lor morte più si ragioni, ponno comprendere gli spettatori che son morti. E di ciò n'avete l'esempio da Euripide nell'*Eraclide*, nella morte di Euristeo. E

what it was to arouse pity and compassion"). In support of this, see the thought in the *Lezioni* (Roaf 1982b, 234-5): "un'altra circostanza fa sopra gli scelerati cadere la compassione e il terrore, e questa dal luogo dove non meritano d'esser puniti. E che dal luogo si mova la pietà Virgilio nel quarto dell'*Eneida* lo dà a vedere in Didone, facendola morir sul letto dove con Enea avea auti tanti piaceri dell'amor suo . . . Questo eziandio si fa nella tragedia nostra dove Canace si dà la morte sopra il letto nel quale avea giaciuto col fratello" ("another circumstance makes us feel compassion and terror for the wicked, and this from the place where they do not deserve punishment. And Virgil arouses pity from the place in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, and he shows it in Dido, having her die on the bed where she enjoyed so many pleasures of her love for Aeneas . . . This is also done in our tragedy where Canace brings about her death on the bed in which she had lain with her brother").

⁴¹ We should bear in mind that Speroni often reflects on the condition of women: for example, he wrote the unfinished *Dialogo della dignità delle donne*. Drafted between 1529 and 1542, it can be found in Pozzi 1978b, 565-84.

⁴² Note that the scene is the first and only one in which Canace is given seems an authentic protagonist. Her rather weak and uncertain status is reinforced by the presence of the nurse, while Macareo's death, described by the servant, seems somewhat half-hearted (1973-82): "Re, il mio signor, che già fu vostro figlio, / oggi è morto due volte: / l'una con la novella della morte / della sorella; l'altra / con questa spada / calda ancor del suo sangue: ove ei la mise / con la sua propria man sì volentieri / che la seconda morte / pareo che gli rendesse quella vita / che la prima gli tolse" ("Sire, my lord, he who once was your son, / today is dead twice over: / once with the news of the death / of his sister; the other / with this sword / still warm with her blood: where he placed it / with his own hand so willingly / that the second death / seemed to give him that life / that the first took from him").

è degno di molta considerazione in questa parte l'antivedere di questo felice ingegno, perché egli, per far nascere questa sconvenevol morte, si parte da Ovidio. E ove egli fa che Eolo sol manda la spada a Canace, costui vi fa anche mandare il veneno, perché con esso la nutrice si dia la morte.

[her low estate makes her unworthy to die in Tragedy; in which only the deaths of great masters take place, not of servants or serving-women, or humble domestics; which you can judge from the example of the Greeks and Latin and from the very definition of Tragedy that you have from Aristotle. Nor does it matter here that the nurse's death is not described onstage, as many times Tragic writers only hint at the deaths of the wicked, so that, without our thinking more on their death, they let the audience understand they are dead. And you have an example of this in Euripides' *Heracleidae*, in the death of Eurystheus. And the way the clever trick in this part is presaged is well worth considering, because he starts from Ovid to bring about this unseemly death. And where Ovid has Aeolus only send the sword to Canace, he also has him send the poison, as the nurse may kill herself with it.]

The questions raised in the *Giudizio* are fundamental for understanding *Canace*. First, the nurse, theoretically, is indeed on a somewhat low level on the social scale; yet her actual role in the tragedy is not secondary, since it crosses the limits imposed by *convenientia*. The deepest gulf separating Giraldi from Speroni is in the field of *inventio*: “si confrontano due concezioni opposte della letteratura, l'una retorica, proiettata verso il pubblico, realistica, didattica e morale, l'altra poetica, rivolta verso il testo, i suoi meccanismi di costruzione e funzionamento, allegorica e edonistica” (“two opposing conceptions of literature are contrasted, one rhetorical, projected toward the audience, realistic, didactic and moral, the other poetic, directed toward the text, its mechanisms of construction and functioning, allegorical and hedonistic”, Jossa 1996, 23). Really, Speroni's nurse is not a mediocre or humble figure who does no more than support the protagonists, as in some cases she even stands in for them. While Canace and Macareo recognize the error of their tie and are racked by remorse, the nurse justifies her masters' behaviour with heterodox arguments. Her behaviour stems from this ideological position which is at the antipodes of the ethical canons of sixteenth-century society and Christian tradition, es. *Leviticus* 18, 6: “omnis homo ad proximam sanguinis sui non accedet, ut revelet turpitudinem eius” (“None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness”, KJV).⁴³

In addition, the protagonists' inexperience and repeated hesitations contrast with the old woman's readiness, openly challenging Eolo in the absorbing scene of the basket. In short, whether she is *scellerata* (“wicked”), follow-

⁴³ I quote from Weber and Fischer 1980.

ing Giraldi's interpretative categories, or merely *mezzana* ("intermediate"), the nurse takes her own life because she is at the centre of the drama, not on its fringes.⁴⁴ The writer thus saturates the potential of the minor tragic figure and strains Aristotelian theory to breaking point.⁴⁵ The joint suicide of Canace and the nurse seems strange, as often in tragedy the isolated, solemn death of the heroine discloses an *exemplum* of rectitude, or indicates the brutality of the oppressor who orders her elimination.⁴⁶ In *Canace*, instead, we have a death that the sharing of a mutual existential progress takes to its extreme consequences. Giraldi's pedagogic view of catharsis thus gave way to compassion, which disoriented the audience and the disturbing story seemed to implicate them. Speroni's disrespect of tradition was explained by Felice Paciotto by the restricted, elite audience of *Canace*.⁴⁷ While Giraldi wanted edifying, consoling tragedies that would educate a large number of spectators ("idioti", "the ignorants"), Speroni wrote an avant-garde work for a learned audience of "virtuosi" ("connoisseurs") and "studiosi dell'antica poesia" ("scholars of ancient poetry", Dalle Laste and Forcellini 1740a, 232).

Finally, we should add a missing link in the chain of the *inventio* of Speroni's nurse: there is another model for her in Myrrha's servant in the *Metamorphoses* (10.298-502): Speroni himself in the *Apologia* mentions several times yet another Ovidian source with the aim of justifying the disconcerting nature of Canace as well as his casual way of reworking the classics.⁴⁸ In addition, Myrrha's nurse is called a "buona femmina" ("good woman") because "assai fece per delivarla di quello amore scelerato, alla perfine, perché visse, le fe' godere degli abbracciamenti del padre" ("she did much to deliver her from that wicked love, and in the end, let her enjoy her father's embraces so that she might live", Roaf 1982a, 191). In Ovid she is devoted to the protagonist, whom she saves miraculously from a suicide attempt: after a detailed discussion, the nurse discovers that Myrrha is in love with her father Cinyras. She does not try to stop her mistress, but encourages and supports her - "vive, ait haec, 'potiere tuo' - et non ausa 'parente' / dice-

⁴⁴ Sunno's argument is apt (Dalle Laste and Forcellini 1740b, 254): "le persone introdotte dal Sperone non han patito cosa o difficile o impossibile da sostenersi da uomo: ma piuttosto han operato cosa, che per non la fare dovean esporsi ad ogni danno e ruina ed anco morire" ("the characters introduced by Sperone have not suffered anything difficult or impossible for a man to bear: but they have rather done something, which not doing would leave them open to all kinds of harm and ruin and even death").

⁴⁵ The most innovative nurse in antiquity is that in Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers*: in the second episode of the first stasimon she ignores Clytemnestra's advice and, convinced by the maidservants, goes to Aegisthus, telling him to return home without his armed escort. On this, see Margon 1983, 286-97.

⁴⁶ See the discussions of Ventricelli 2009, 31-7 and Gallo 2019b, 45-64.

⁴⁷ On Speroni's polymorphic classicism, see Fournel 1990 and Katinis 2018.

⁴⁸ On this, see Cotugno 2018.

re, conticuit, promissaque numine firmat” (“‘Live then’ said the other, ‘have your’ — she did not dare say ‘father’; she said no more, calling on Heaven to confirm her promises”, 429-30).⁴⁹ The plan hatched by the nurse is described by Ovid in detail: as soon as the stratagem succeeds, the *mala sedula nutrix* bursts out in a resounding “gaude mea . . . alumna: / vicimus!” (“Rejoice, my child, we win”, 438, 442-3); she then accompanies Myrrha inside her father’s bedroom and encourages her mistress not to hesitate - “cunctantem longae-va manu deducit, et alto / admotam lecto cum traderet ‘Accipe’, dixit, / ‘ista tua est, Cinyra’, devotaque corpora iunxit” (“leads her by the hand to the side of the high bed and, delivering her over, says: ‘Take her, Cinyras, she is yours’; and leaves the doomed pair together”, 462-4).⁵⁰

Ovid’s nurses are actively involved in the intrigue, but are not killed, as their death cannot obscure Canace’s guilt-ridden dejection or the anguished transformation of Myrrha. In Speroni, by contrast, the nurse kills herself out of diegetic coherence: the shadow heroine of the tragedy – now complementing the protagonists, now supplementing them – dies alongside her mistress, because jointly responsible in the drama. She does not merely facilitate the incest of brother and sister, but – whereas Macareo’s and Canace’s love is Venus’ sadistic punishment – seems the real guilty party against whom Eolo’s fury is turned.

Translation by Richard Bates

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⁴⁹ All quotations from Ovid are from Anderson 1977. All translations from Ovid are from Miller 1916.

⁵⁰ This passage in Ovid is discussed by Scaffai 1999, 371-87 and Schmitz 2015, 245-83.

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