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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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## One, None and a Hundred-Thousand. The *Nutrix* in Seneca's *Phaedra*: a Blend of Roles and Literary Genres

### Abstract

Among the *dramatis personae* of Seneca's *Phaedra*, the Nurse is perhaps the most complex and multifaceted. In Euripides' *Hippolytus* the Nurse does not lack a central role and three-dimensional stance, especially because of her oratory skills, but she does not differ excessively from the stereotyped character of tragedy. On the other hand, the role and function of the Nurse are expanded by Seneca. She does not simply embody the 'voice of reason' (however imbued with Stoic philosophy) against *Phaedra's furor*: she is the moving force of the tragedy. She takes up an authorial role akin to that of Plautus' slave; she turns into a comic *lena* in order to lead Hippolytus to the realms of Venus; she improvises as a priestess while delivering a prayer to Diana; she is also a skilled philosopher and declaimer. Nevertheless, she does not truly fulfill any of these roles and ends up being the humble servant of her queen. Each of her transformations is a failure; but, on closer examination, they are a failure from *Phaedra's* perspective. Resigning her authorial role, *de facto* the Nurse becomes an instrument of the real 'author' of the drama, that is, Nature. *Phaedra* is a tragedy of Nature and the limits it imposes on human beings. Through her apparently disastrous choices, the Nurse helps Nature establish its undisputed dominion.

KEYWORDS: Nurse; Seneca; *Phaedra*; Nature; Roman tragedy; authorial role; metatheatre

*Etiam nunc optas quod tibi optavit  
nutrix tua aut paedagogus aut  
mater? nondum intellegis quantum  
mali optaverint?  
(Sen. Epist. 60.1)*

The Nurse is a recurrent character of ancient myth. Her archetype can be traced back to Eurykleia, Telemachos' Nurse, in the *Odyssey*; but it is in Greek tragedy that she gains an increasingly prominent, albeit subsidiary, role. Among the extant examples, we can number Kilissa, Orestes' Nurse in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, and Deianeira's Nurse in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. But it is Euripides who confers a significant and conspicuous role upon her: the Nurses in *Andromache*, *Medea*, and *Hippolytus* stand

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out as the fruit of a well-established tradition. The Nurse is an old woman characterised by an unshakable and selfless loyalty to her master/mistress; faithful to the point of risking her own life in order to be a good servant. She usually takes up the role of confidant and advisor; she is also the 'voice of reason' that tries to turn the heroes and heroines away from a tragic course of events, relying on the authority she exercises on her pupil. Needless to say, her efforts to avoid tragedy always fail.<sup>1</sup>

The Nurse figure, perfected by Euripides, is taken over by Roman tragedy – that is, by Seneca, the only Latin dramatist whose tragedies have survived in their entirety. She has a prominent role in *Medea*, *Phaedra*, and *Hercules Oetaeus*, as in their Attic models; a Nurse appears as a major character in Seneca's *Agamemnon* as well. The Latin dramatist builds on a traditional and well-defined character; however, he incorporates his own touch into the Nurse figure, assigning her a more complex and nuanced role than his Attic forerunners.

In this paper, I will focus on the play *Phaedra*, as I believe the Nurse of this tragedy best encapsulates Seneca's authorial innovations in the function of the character. I will argue that Seneca inherits from Euripides the Nurse figure as an 'authorial' character meant to lead the protagonists to catastrophe, but on the other hand, he contaminates her with other figures (philosopher, declaimer, Plautine servant, *lena*, priestess, elegiac poetess), drawn from other genres than tragedy. Far from being an inconsistent and unsuccessful character (as argued by Garbarino 2008, 662-3), the Nurse's metamorphoses are, from a dramatic perspective, functional to the development of the plot and to the fulfilment of the tragedy. All her transformations are disastrous, but, at the end of the play, she contributes to establishing the dominion of Nature, the ultimate, whimsical, and ever-transforming authorial force pulling the strings of the tragedy. First, I will analyze the manifold roles *Phaedra's* Nurse takes up in the Senecan tragedy in comparison to the Euripidean model in order to highlight how all of her transformations fail to achieve their goals; then, I will reflect on how all these failures are a catastrophe from the main characters' points of view, while they mark the triumph of Nature over Hippolytus' and *Phaedra's* aberrations.

## 1. The Downfall of Wisdom

The standard role assigned to the Nurse by the tragedians is the voice of

<sup>1</sup> Karydas (1998) and Castrucci (2017) offer extensive studies on the Nurse figures in Greek tragedies; see also Gill 1990, 87-8; Yoon 2012, 13-21, 86-92.

reason. As to dramatic action, she attempts to oppose the impulses and the decisions of the main characters, which she is aware will lead to a tragic outcome. The function of this character is the creation of tension between a doomed course of events, which will drag the main characters into a catastrophe, and a force of opposite sign, also destined to be swept away. This is particularly true of *Hippolytus*' Nurse:

of all the anonymous figures in extant tragedy, she has the strongest claim to 'moral agency'; she describes a distinct ethical framework, and the disaster stems from her strong sense of expediency and her failure to understand the sincerity and nobility of Phaedra's resolve to die. (Yoon 2012, 87)<sup>2</sup>

The Nurse of Seneca's *Phaedra* is no exception. She shares this trait with Euripides' Nurse, who initially tries to divert her mistress from giving in to her passion. The Nurse quotes the Delphic saying "nothing in excess" (μηδὲν ἄγαν, 265) and states that all the sages will agree with her (ξυμφοῖσιν σοφοί μοι, 266). Later on, she acknowledges Phaedra's helplessness against Aphrodite and hatches a plan to heal her; Phaedra is afraid the Nurse may seem "too wise" (δέδοιχ' ὅπως μοι μὴ λίαν φανῆς σοφή, 519).

As in the Euripidean paradigm, Seneca's Nurse is a wise character. She reproaches Phaedra for her illegitimate lust and does her best to discourage her; when Phaedra threatens to kill herself (254), she tries to make Hippolytus give in to the power of love; finally, she works out the idea of blaming Hippolytus for using violence on Phaedra. In this regard, Seneca's Nurse is not just intelligent, but can be seen as more cunning than Euripides' character.<sup>3</sup>

However, as universally noted by scholars, she raises her role as 'voice of reason' to a higher, philosophical level. I will not discuss the complex problem of the extent to which Seneca's tragedies reflect, albeit in a distorted way, his thinking and worldview; *Phaedra* has already been studied from a philosophical perspective (Grimal 1965, 17-21; Lefèvre 1969; Leeman 1976; Giancotti 1986, 11-57; Schmidt 1995; Laurant 2012-2013; Mazzoli 2016, 85-97). I will just focus on the Nurse's philosophical traits, in order to show how Seneca construes her as a failed *sapiens*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The dramatic potential of the Nurse in *Hippolytus* is also underlined by Coffey and Mayer (1990, 9).

<sup>3</sup> Strikingly, in Euripides' tragedy, Artemis herself openly accuses the Nurse of Phaedra's suicide (1304-6). The Nurse is totally responsible for the whole tragedy, while none of it is Phaedra's fault (March 1990, 47). This choice may be due to Euripides' aim of redeeming himself after the heavy criticism of *Veiled Hippolytus*.

<sup>4</sup> Her speech to Phaedra is characterised not only by wisdom, but also by *parrhêsia*: the failure of her plots stands not only for the failure of philosophy, but also for the de-

As mentioned, the Nurse's words and speeches are imbued with philosophical, namely Stoic, *topoi* (cf. Giomini 1955a, 50-4, 80-3; Giomini 1955b, 44-7, 58-61; Grimal 1965, 47-52, 55-8; Leeman 1976, 207; Giancotti 1986, 18, 21-7; Schmidt 1995; Casamento 2011, 152, 156-9, 180-1; Laurand 2012-2013). When the Nurse takes up the role of 'voice of wisdom', the tragic form is contaminated by philosophical prose. For instance, in her opinion, giving in to vice is a kind of voluntary slavery (134-5): this is a recurring theme in Seneca's prose works (e.g. *Brev.* 2.1-2, *Epist.* 22.9-11, 39.6, 47.17, 60.4, 77.15-7). She also claims to be free from fear and pain thanks to her closeness to death, that is, to freedom (138-9); again, the close association of death and freedom is typical of Seneca's philosophy, especially in *De providentia* and in the *Epistles* (e.g. *Prov.* 2.10, 6.7-9, *Ira* 3.15.3-4, *Epist.* 12.10, 26.10, 70.14, 70.19, 77.14-5). Another philosophical commonplace is that a guilty soul is punished by the very feeling of guilt (162-3; cf. *De ira* 3.5.6, 3.26.2, *Ben.* 3.17.3-4, *Epist.* 27.2, 42.2, 87.24-5, 97.14-6, 105.7-8, 115.16; Schmidt 1995, 279-80.). The idea that the gods were invented to justify vice and insanity (195-7) bears resemblances to some Epicurean thought,<sup>5</sup> but it is also a commonplace of Stoic criticism of Epicureanism<sup>6</sup>. Generally speaking, the dialogue between Phaedra and the Nurse can be seen as a dramatic enactment of the opposition between fatalism and freedom (Giancotti 1986, 19-20; Mazzoli 2016, 87-8); that is, a philosophical diatribe in dramatic guise.

The Nurse's speech to Hippolytus incorporates philosophical stock themes as well. He who is bestowed with goods by Fortune but nevertheless chooses evil deserves to lose what he has (441-3). To persuade Hippolytus to give in to love, she employs the Stoic motto *sequere naturam* (481) (Grimal 1965, 90; Leeman 1976, 207; Coffey and Mayer 1990, 134; Casamento 2011, 180-5). The phrasing of the verse "follow nature as your life guide" (*vitae sequere naturam ducem*) bears a striking resemblance to Cic. *off.* 1.100: "if we follow nature as our guide, we will never go astray" (*naturam si sequeremur ducem, numquam aberrabimus*), but it reflects the widespread Stoic tenet of "living in accordance with nature" (ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν, Diog. Laert. 7.87 = SVF 1:179). However, topics such as the necessity of love for the preservation of the universe and the exhortation to enjoy the pleasures of Venus recall Epicurean rather than Stoic tenets (Boyle 1987, 166; Schmidt 1995, 292).

feat of free speech in a monarchic (i.e. Imperial) context (Laurand 2012-2013).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Lucretius' criticism of *religio*, whose lies lead men to *scelerosa atque impia facta* (1.84).

<sup>6</sup> According to some moralists, Epicureanism was used to justify a luxurious and hedonistic lifestyle. See for instance Cic. *Tusc.* 4.6-7, *fin.* 2.49-50, *Pis.* 68-9; Sen. *Const.* 15.4, *vit. Beat.* 12-13, *Ben.* 4.2, 4.13.1, *Epist.* 21.9-10, 79.15, 123.10-11; Epict. *diss.* 3.24.38-9. This kind of criticism is part of a wider reprimand against the *ineptiae poetarum* that lead to vice (Grimal 1965, 55, refers to *Brev.* 16.5 and *Vit. beat.* 26.6).



The Nurse may seem to deploy philosophical commonplaces in a rhetorical manner in order to persuade others and achieve her goals; she may be accused of intellectual dishonesty. Her speeches seem to reflect the early Imperial age trend of philosophical *declamatio* revolving around *quaestiones infinitae* (see below). Some modern scholars accuse her of using “good Stoic doctrine in a bad cause” (Coffey and Mayer 1990, 134) or point out that “she advocates Stoic principles in the service of a wrong cause. The principles are moral, but their application merely utilitarian” (Leeman 1976, 207). Nevertheless, she does her best to keep things in order and to prevent Phaedra from killing herself. Her role as *vox rationis* is certainly ambiguous, but cannot be wholly dismissed, at least in her primary aims: in fact, she exploits the power of *logos* (that is, reason and speech) to dominate events and prevent catastrophe.

The Nurse’s tragedy stands for the irreconcilable conflict between a *ratio* trying to master events and a sealed fate that human beings can only obey. This downfall of wisdom against Fortune was already stated by Euripides’ Nurse (700-1), but Seneca emphasises the philosophical aspects of the character (and, consequently, the failure of philosophy). Drama-wise, Seneca’s Nurse-Philosopher struggles to sort out the threads of her existence and that of the other characters into an orderly plot inspired by *ratio*, that is, philosophy; her struggle turns out to be a total failure.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the real and almighty author of the tragic development is Nature. Ironically enough, the Nurse urges Hippolytus to follow Nature, but she’s the one who tries to rebel against Fate (stoically coinciding with Nature) by blindly loving Phaedra and supporting her (admittedly) unnatural desire.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the Nurse’s exaggerated affection for her mistress falls within the scope of *furor* as well, not *ratio* (Giancotti 1986, 18; Schmidt 1995, 283-4). The Nurse, Hippolytus, and Phaedra are all under the illusion that they know Nature and can dominate it, but in fact it will lead them into defeat or, as in the Nurse’s case, into a new natural order.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Seneca the Elder’s *Phaedra*: Tragic *Declamatio*

As widely recognised by scholars, Seneca is a man of his own time as

<sup>7</sup> The failure of the Nurse’s plots is examined by Schmidt 1995; Frangoulidis 2009; Laurand 2012-2013.

<sup>8</sup> The Nurse herself had stated the ungodliness of Phaedra’s desire in the Act 1 (171-3); “she accepts herself the crime out of the weakness of her soul” (Grimal 1965, 16, translation mine)

<sup>9</sup> On the concepts of nature and anti-nature in *Phaedra* see Mazzoli 2016, 88-96; cf. Boyle 1987, 18-24, 213-14; Mayer 2002, 37-9.

regards to rhetoric. Both his philosophical and dramatic production is strongly influenced by *declamatio*, that is, formal and artistic public speech generally practised as part of high-class education. The two main subgenres of *declamatio* were the *controversia*, in which the student acted as a *patronus* defending a cause, and the *suasoria*, a speech delivered to a mythical or historical character in order to persuade them to take, or dissuade them from taking, a certain action. Seneca the Elder notoriously collected fragments of Augustan rhetoricians' *controversiae* and *suasoriae* for his children's (and his audience's) education.

Seneca the Younger learnt the lesson from his father. The influence of *declamatio* upon his work is particularly observable in his *Phaedra* and in the Nurse's speeches.<sup>10</sup> The dialogue between Phaedra and the Nurse in Act 1 can be viewed as a *controversia* between the two characters arguing whether sexual impulses can be dominated by reason. This kind of argument about general, if not philosophical, topics finds a parallel in the *quaestiones infinitae*, with which *declamationes* often deal. The two characters participate in a skillfully constructed debate, in which each speech or line by one character is balanced by another of equal length (Coffey and Mayer 1990, 19); but it is the Nurse who assaults Phaedra with her panoply of rhetorical weapons. In Act 2, she delivers a *suasoria* on a declamatory stock theme, *an uxor ducenda sit*; this kind of *declamatio* focuses on moralising themes rather than on dramatic exchange.<sup>11</sup>

The Nurse's speeches in Act 1 employ the rhetorical technique of "point by point rebuttal" (Coffey and Mayer 1990, 109-10).<sup>12</sup> Phaedra had spoken about the divine power of love over *ratio* (184-5); the Nurse replies that the divinity of *amor* is a made-up lie (195-6). Phaedra describes *amor* (or, better, *furor*) as a flying (186, 194) and armed (193) creature; the Nurse makes fun of such attributes (198-201). This technique becomes more and more obvious as the debate goes on and the speeches get shorter and shorter, especially in the stichomythia and antilabe section (218-73).

Another rhetorical device widely used by the Nurse is *sententia*, a typical trait of Seneca's prose and dramatic works. In both genres, Seneca deploys moral maxims to express general human truths, in order to strengthen his arguments. This is exactly what the Nurse does in her

<sup>10</sup> On the rhetorical elements in Seneca's *Phaedra*, see Giomini 1955b, 44-7; Coffey and Mayer 1990, 18-20; Mayer 2002, 71-3; cf. Giancotti 1986, 62-4, 104; Casamento 2011, 14-7, 19-21, 165, 180-1. Euripides' Nurse utters rhetorically constructed speeches as well, as an influence of contemporary sophistic usage (Castrucci 2017, 45-7).

<sup>11</sup> Coffey and Mayer 1990, 131; cf. Morelli 2004, 42-3. The existence of this *quaestio infinita* is attested by Quintilian (2.4.25, 3.5.8, 3.5.12-16).

<sup>12</sup> The dialogue between Phaedra and the Nurse has been analysed from a pragmatic perspective by Calabrese 2009, 27-43.

speeches. Just to quote the most notable ones:

if one feeds the evil with sweet caresses and flattering words, / submits to the yoke, it becomes too late to resist (“qui blandiendo dulce nutrit malum, / sero recusat ferre quod subiit iugum”, 134-5; trans. Wilson 2010, here and below); first: want the right things, no straying. / The second is knowing and setting a limit to one’s sins (“honesta primum est velle nec labi via, / pudor est secundus nosse peccandi modum”, 140-1); a person who delights in too much fortune, / who has too much already, always wants new things (“quisquis secundis rebus exultat nimis / fluitque luxu, semper insolita appetit”, 204-5); those who have too much power want no limits to their power (“quod non potest vult posse qui nimium potest”, 215; perhaps the most skillfully worked out).

The most remarkable *sententia* is uttered by the Nurse in her *suasoria* to Hippolytus: “follow nature” (*sequere naturam*, 481; see above).

To eradicate insanity from Phaedra’s soul, the Nurse utters a series of rhetorical questions, which confer a pounding pace on her speeches through the use of anaphora or polyptoton of interrogative pronouns (*quis*), adjectives (*qui*), and adverbs (*cur*).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, rhetorical questions are less frequent in the Nurse’s speech to Hippolytus. This makes her *suasoria* less powerful than her speeches to Phaedra: indeed, her attempt to make Hippolytus give in to love rapidly fails. The Nurse also makes use of *argumenta a fortiori*: for instance, to convince Phaedra that her *nefas* cannot stay hidden, the Nurse argues that if crimes cannot go unnoticed even by husbands and parents, all the more the Sun will discover and punish her (145-64). Again, this argument is strengthened by two *sententiae*: “parents are perceptive” (*sagax parentum cura est*, 152); and “women may sin unpunished, but never get off scot-free” (*scelus aliqua tutum, nulla securum tulit*, 164).

Seneca’s *Phaedra* is not just rhetoric; it is enacted rhetoric. That is, the *controversia* and the *suasoria* are not uttered by the authorial voice but by a character with authorial function. Seneca mixes the two genres, *declamatio* and tragedy, in order to confer a debate-like pace to the drama. Furthermore, such a confrontation between two opposing points

<sup>13</sup> Some examples: “poor woman, what are you doing? Why make worse the shame of your house, / even outdoing your mother?”, (“quo, misera, pergis? quid domum infamem aggravas / superasque matrem?”, 142-3); “why are there not more monsters? Why is your brother’s palace empty?” (“cur monstra cessant? aula cur fratris vacat?”, 174); “why does this pestilence choose fancy, pretentious houses, / and not creep so often into moderate hearths? / Why does a holy Venus live under lowly roofs . . . ?” (“cur in penates rarius tenues subit / haec delicatas eligens pestis domos? / cur sancta parvis habitat in tectis Venus . . . ?”, 209-11).

of view is functional to the development of the plot. The Nurse deploys all her rhetorical skill first to dissuade Phaedra from her insane love, and then to persuade Hippolytus to embrace to love: both attempts fail. In particular, the Nurse's attempted *dissuasio* toward Phaedra fails from an argumentative point of view; she is compelled to change rhetorical strategy, relying more on emotion than on reason and abandoning her role of the 'voice of reason'.<sup>14</sup> Once again, her rhetorical strategies have no effect: it is a "dialogue de sourds" (Laurand 2012-2013, 155). But it is the Nurse's very failure that activates the tragic plot, which will result in Nature's triumph over the two main character's unnatural excesses.

### 3. A Plautine Servant

As Stavros Frangoulidis argues (2009, but such a suggestion had already been made by Grimal 1965, 17), the role of Nurse in Seneca's *Phaedra* shares many traits with the *servus callidus* in Plautus' comedy. These analogies can be traced to the metatheatrical, authorial role of both characters (obviously in addition to the servile state of both figures). The close identification between the clever slave and the playwright's persona is a matter of general agreement among scholars:<sup>15</sup> his plans to cheat his master, or to help him with his love affairs, entail a metatheatrical reflection on the comedy's plot and the work of the author. The most famous example of *servus callidus* is Pseudolus, who breaks the stage illusion to demonstrate his total mastery of the plot; he openly states his metatheatrical function at *Ps.* 399-405.

Metatheatre is a concept fruitfully applied to Seneca's tragedies as well, especially by Alessandro Schiesaro (2003, esp. 13-15; cf. also Boyle 2006, 208-18). In the broader sense of the term, Seneca does not use metatheatrical devices (e.g. characters talking to the audience) that break down the 'fourth wall'. On the other hand, Seneca's plays show how passions create tragedy not only as a catastrophe, but also as a play – this is what Schiesaro defines as metadrama, viewing *Thyestes* as poetic creation reflecting on the very act of creating.

The same metatheatrical, or metadramatic, function pinpointed in Plautus' *servus callidus* and in Seneca's *Thyestes* can be found in *Phaedra*'s

<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, another rhetorical strategy, which characterises the Nurse even more as a skilled declaimer. Cf. Coffey and Mayer 1990, 14; Calabrese 2009, 39-40; Casamento 2011, 163.

<sup>15</sup> On the significant role played by the *servus callidus* in Plautine comedy, see Fraenkel 1960, 223-41. The fundamental studies of the slave's metatheatrical role are Barchiesi 1969, Petrone 1983, and Slater 1985; see also Moore 1998; Sharrock 2009, 116-40; Christenson 2019.

Nurse as well. Relying on her psychological authority over Phaedra, she manages to manipulate her and her actions. Such dominance goes back to the Nurse figures of Aeschylus and Sophocles, while Euripides' Nurse is marked more by intimacy and confidence: rather it is Phaedra who exerts an authoritative role (Yoon 2012, 15-7).<sup>16</sup> Stavros Frangoulidis focuses especially on the inset play performed by the Nurse, namely the making up of the rape by Hippolytus, comparing it to the inset plays performed by Plautus' scheming slaves, such as Palaestrio in *Miles gloriosus* and *Curculio*'s eponymous parasite (Frangoulidis 2009, 411 and n23). Furthermore, when confronted with Theseus' unexpected arrival, the Nurse acts exactly like the *servus callidus*, who takes advantage of unforeseen events to make the plot go forward, as Tranio does in *Mostellaria* at the arrival of Misargyrides (Frangoulidis 2009, 414 and n27). Again, the assumption of a new role by the Nurse is marked by an influence on the tragedy of a different genre.

The main difference between the two figures is in the outcome of their plots. The forces set in motion by the Plautine slave are in conformity with the development of the comedy's plot, while the Nurse's schemes run counter to the course of events shaped by Phaedra and Hippolytus, or rather events of which Phaedra and Hippolytus are instruments. In Plautine comedy, the carnivalesque subversion is followed by a restoration of the initial order at the hand of the slave; in *Phaedra*, the Nurse's plans will have a tragic outcome. But, as I will argue later, *Phaedra*'s ending also involves the creation of a new order, paradoxically thanks to the Nurse's actions.

#### 4. A Tragicomic *Lena*

*Phaedra*'s Nurse seems to share some traits with another comedy character, that is, the *lena*, the 'female pimp'. A *lena* is a woman who has been a prostitute and now teaches the job to other young women (who are generally her daughters from casual partners), expecting them to bring home money for her. The most famous *lenae* are Cleareta in the *Asinaria* and Melaenis and Lena in the *Cistellaria*; their presence is not limited to comedy, as they appear in elegy as well.<sup>17</sup>

The Nurse and the *lena* share some features as stock characters: they

<sup>16</sup> Though of lower rank, the Nurse negotiates her position relative to Phaedra and gains an authoritative role over her mistress through a pragmatic use of language (Calabrese 2009, 27-43).

<sup>17</sup> On the *lena* figure in comedy and other genres, see Myers 1996; Fayer 2013, 323-75; Augenti 2018, 61-75.

are both middle-aged or old women who exert a motherly, authoritative role over younger main female characters; they are both experienced and wise and give judicious advice to their pupils. But *Phaedra's* Nurse seems to be even closer to the role of procuress. In fact, she negotiates an affair between Phaedra and Hippolytus, in the way a *lena* tries to persuade, or deceive, a new client; a viable parallel is the old fruit seller in Petronius' *Satyricon*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, at some points the Nurse appears unsympathetic towards Phaedra.<sup>19</sup> In Act 1, the Nurse makes no effort to understand Phaedra's passion and reproaches her harshly. When Phaedra declares her will to kill herself, the Nurse opposes her mistress' decision and accepts to negotiate with Hippolytus to keep Phaedra alive. This lack of empathy is also a common trait of comic *lenae*, whose only interest is in their young girls getting paid for their job. Being a slave acting as a pimp, her role is close to that of Scapha in Plautus' *Mostellaria*.<sup>20</sup>

From a dramatic point of view, the function of the *lena* is to hamper the main plot of the comedy, that is, the love story between a boy and a prostitute, a relationship that she wants to be only occasional and remunerative. In *Phaedra's* Act 1, the Nurse seems to fulfil an analogous role: Phaedra is in love with Hippolytus but the Nurse tries to dissuade her; the main difference is that the Nurse obviously does not push Phaedra towards prostitution. Later, however, the Nurse takes up the role of the *lena* with the aim of promoting the love affair between Phaedra and Hippolytus. Nevertheless, she fails once again, and instead of creating a new love, she leads both characters to tragedy. On closer inspection, the Nurse's actions hamper the course of events desired by Phaedra, instead of fostering them: in this regard, the Nurse gets even closer to the comic role of the *lena*, conferring a tragicomic vibe on the play.

## 5. A(n Im)pious Priestess

At 406-30 there is a prayer to Diana. These verses are perhaps the most philologically tormented of the whole play. According to all manuscripts, it is the Nurse who delivers the prayer to the goddess, but this view has been challenged many times (see mainly Fantham 1993; Coffey and Mayer 1990, 127; Gamberale 2007). For reasons of space I cannot run through the whole

<sup>18</sup> Petron. 7. When asked by Encolpius where his house is, this old lady replies "this should be your house", revealing herself as a *lena* hunting for clients. On her character, see Augenti 2018, 68-9.

<sup>19</sup> The Nurse is already characterised as impatient and lacking sympathy by Euripides in his *Hippolytus* (Barrett 1964, 195-7).

<sup>20</sup> On Scapha, see Fayer 2013, 353-8.



issue in detail, but some observations are necessary. Among the arguments against the attribution of the prayer to the priestess is its alleged inappropriateness, if not impiety: calling on the goddess of chastity to make Hippolytus give in to erotic love has been seen as more appropriate to Phaedra's *furor* (Giomini 1955a, 76-7, who nevertheless attributes the prayer to the Nurse; Giomini 1955b, 58; Gamberale 2007, 67-8; La Bua 1999; 302-4; Mazzoli 2016, 290). Furthermore, the prayer seems to contradict the Nurse's requiring Phaedra to maintain her role as Hippolytus' stepmother (Gamberale 2007, 67). In my view, such incoherencies are consistent with the dramatic development of the Nurse's character.

From an intratextual perspective, Seneca depicts Diana as a goddess of chastity: this is the role that Seneca assigns to the deity and that sets the whole play in motion, generating the contrast with Phaedra's insane love. But, on closer inspection, this is how Hippolytus conceives Diana; he operates a selection of Diana's attributes according to his own beliefs and tendencies. So does the Nurse, who invokes the goddess in order to lead Hippolytus to erotic love. These two aspects are also present in Artemis/Diana from a broader historical-religious perspective, as her cult is related to marriage and childbirth as well.<sup>21</sup> The Nurse's prayer is just and pious, as sex and marriage are not forbidden by the goddess, but encouraged as a natural function; she does not dictate life-long virginity. Such traits may suffice to justify the content of the prayer without appealing to Phaedra's *furor*.

The inconsistency of this prayer with the Nurse's speeches in Act 1 is paradoxically consistent with the proteiform character of the woman. She takes on different forms in order for her mistress not to suffer or die: such a sudden rethinking of Phaedra's erotic fantasy with Hippolytus fits perfectly with the numerous changes of mind and tactics of the Nurse. Since she is also responsible for *Phaedra's* genre contaminations (declamation, comedy, elegy), it is also consistent with the trend I am outlining in this paper: that through the Nurse Seneca touches on another literary genre, the cletic hymn.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the prayer is an important part of her polymorphous

<sup>21</sup> Artemis/Diana is not just a goddess of virginity: her cult comprehends various feminine rites of passage related to puberty, marriage, and childbirth. In this respect, Artemis was worshipped as a goddess of fertility too. This is especially true for Artemis' cults at Brauron and Mounichia (Giuman 1999; Léger 2017, 6-7, 12-8, 83-90, 113). The many-breasted statue found at Ephesus is also generally interpreted as illustrating Artemis' role of goddess of fertility (Léger 2017: 45); even a Dionysian, orgiastic cult is attested at Brauron and Halai Araphenides (Giuman 1999, 153-6, 180-3). The main sources for such a cult are a scholion to Aristophanes (*Pax* 874-6) and the Suda lexicon (s.v. Βραυρών).

<sup>22</sup> The typical hymnic elements of this prayer are pointed out by Giomini 1955a, 76; Boyle 1987, 163-5; La Bua 1999, 302-4; Gamberale 2007, 62-6. Elaine Fantham (1993) analyz-

authorial role in the tragedy.

Finally, the high solemnity of the prayer has been considered more appropriate to a queen than to a slave (Fantham 1993, 163; Gamberale 2007, 66-7). This observation must not be underestimated; nevertheless, given the versatile and skilled nature of the Nurse, I find no difficulty with her improvising a prayer following all the standards of a traditional cletic hymn. Furthermore, nurses' prayers are a *topos* of moralistic discourse (e.g. Hor. *Epist.* 1.4.8-11; Sen. *Epist.* 60.1; cf. Berno 2017): the image of a nurse praying for her pupil seems even more appropriate to the context of the play.

If it is the Nurse who delivers the prayer to Diana, is she an impious priestess? She may be, but only from Hippolytus' point of view: he envisages Diana as a goddess of chastity. The two prayers to Diana, the one delivered by Hippolytus (54-85) and that uttered by the Nurse, simply focus on complementary aspects of the goddess, suppressing other features (Segal 1986, 66-7). Furthermore, Hippolytus is led to his death by his complete refusal of the sexual sphere in the name of Nature, though this turns out to be against the latter's laws. Depending on the perspective, Hippolytus' prayer may be deemed more impious than the Nurse's.

The Nurse's prayer may also be a failure from Phaedra's perspective: instead of rousing love in the young boy, the Nurse strengthens his misogyny and repudiation of sexual desire. But, again, it is a matter of perspective. *De facto* the Nurse cooperates, albeit unconsciously, with Nature, the ultimate plot-maker of the tragedy. From Nature's point of view, the Nurse is truly pious.

## 6. The (Anti-)Elegy of Lady Nurse

The Nurse's speeches to Phaedra and Hippolytus rely on a number of *topoi* drawn from Roman elegy, mainly from Ovid. Thus she improvises as an elegiac poet: her role switches are signaled by the use of different genre conventions; she takes on a role in which she fails to fit. The general analogies between *Phaedra* and its elegiac model, Ovid's fourth *Heroid*, have already been analyzed (see esp. Morelli 2004, 42-64): I will focus on the speeches delivered by the Nurse.

In her first speech to Phaedra, the Nurse endeavors to divert her from her insanity. Dissuasion from painful love is the main topic of Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, an erotic-didascalic poem through which the

es the repetition of cletic elements to show that the prayer may be divided between Phaedra and the Nurse, in a sort of call and response chant.



poet teaches his audience how to recover from heartache. In this respect, the poem is an anti-elegy: the function of the genre is subverted from within by a (former) elegiac poet. The Nurse's speech to Phaedra bears many similarities with *Remedia amoris*, as noted by various scholars (e.g. Giomini 1955a, 50; Grimal 1965, 48; Giancotti 1986, 21-2; Coffey and Mayer 1990, 103-4; Mayer 2002, 70; Casamento 2011, 156, 160). The call to forsake love before it becomes unescapable (129-35) echoes a famous section of Ovid's poem (*rem.* 71-110): the Nurse's admonishments to "extinguish the flames", (*extingue flammās*, 131) and to "restrain the flames" (*compesce . . . flammās*, 165) echo *Ov. rem.* 53 (*extinguere flammās*) and 69 (*conpescite curas*); both texts describe love as a voluntary yoke to throw off, e.g. *Phaedr.* 135: "submits to the yoke, it becomes too late to resist", (*sero recusat ferre quod subiit iugum*; cf. *Ov. rem.* 91-2). The close association between a pathological love (*libido*) and wealth (*luxus*) expressed by the Nurse (204-8) is found again in the *Remedia amoris* (742-6: *luxuriosus amor*): not coincidentally, Ovid uses Phaedra as an example of such a love. The image of love creeping under the skin (*subit*) like subtle fire or illness is also typical of Roman elegy (e.g. *Ov. Am.* 1.2.6), as is the association between erotic and military language (the *topos* of the *militia amoris*).

The Second Act of the tragedy begins with the Nurse describing Phaedra's *furor*. Her speech, which echoes Phaedra's self-description of Act 1 (99-128),<sup>23</sup> owes a lot to the *topos* of love's symptomatology, consecrated by Sappho and Catullus, but rhetoricised by elegiac poets. Just to mention a few of these commonplaces: young lovers cannot sleep at night (*Tib.* 2.4.11; *Prop.* 1.1.33, 2.17.3-4, 4.3.29-42; *Ov. Am.* 1.2.1-4, *Ars* 1.735-6), refuse to eat (*Prop.* 4.3.27-8; *Ov. Ars* 1.735-6), and have a pale complexion (*Prop.* 4.3.27-8; *Ov. Ars* 1.729, *Her.* 13.23); Phaedra's lack of care for her hair and her wandering hither and thither resemble Laodameia's symptomatology in Ovid's thirteenth *Heroid* (31-4). The tears streaming down her face as on ice also find a close parallel in Ovid (*Am.* 1.7.57-8).

Finally, the Nurse's speech to Hippolytus bears a number of resemblances with elegiac poetry as well (Morelli 2004, 42-8). As the Nurse's dramatic role changes from opposer to assistant, literary models also change: if in Act 1 *Remedia amoris* is the main reference, now the Nurse takes up the role of a love teacher, such as that embodied by Ovid in his *Ars amatoria*. In this work, as in Roman elegy in general, urban life is the ideal setting for sane human love relationships: this is the kind of love that the Nurse invites Hippolytus to give in to (Casamento 2011, 20-1, 182-3). Nevertheless, the young boy rejects this urban and social world

<sup>23</sup> The Nurse's description does not only echo Phaedra's words but amplifies them (Schmidt 1995, 289-90).

for the sake of purity and chastity.<sup>24</sup> “Why do you sleep alone?” (*Cur in toro viduo iaces?*, 448) recalls the empty bed of Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus (*Ov. Her.* 5.106);<sup>25</sup> the exhortations to enjoy life and erotic love as a natural feature of youth is also a widespread *topos* in elegiac and erotic poetry, with Ovid inspired by Venus herself (*Ars* 3.59-100).<sup>26</sup> The scene can be understood as an attempt by an elegiac poetess to lure a reader (or better, a listener) into her world; but, again, this attempt fails. From an elegiac perspective, this strategy fails because such *topoi* are to be used by a man who tries to seduce a woman, not by an old lady who tries to lure a young boy (Morelli 2004, 44-6); the Nurse does not know how to employ her knowledge. Still, the main reason for the Nurse’s failure is that Hippolytus is too tightly tied to a perverse idea of Nature, which, in turn, will restore its laws and cause his death: again, the Nurse unconsciously cooperates with Nature.

## 7. Conclusion: the Nurse as Nature’s Dramatic Device

So far I have highlighted how the proteiform Senecan Nurse takes on many different roles in an effort to make herself the author of a drama, over which she ends up having no control. All of her transformations result in a failure and in a new detour from the course of events she covets. Whenever her role changes, Seneca diverts from the rules of tragedy, mixing it with different genres (philosophical diatribe, *declamatio*, comedy, elegy, cletic hymn), but in the end, tragedy turns up to be the main genre of the work. The Nurse’s authorial function is both asserted and denied.

Nonetheless I would like to conclude by casting a glimmer of positive light, however feeble, on the Nurse and the whole Senecan tragedy.<sup>27</sup> All of the Nurse’s actions are driven by her deep affection for Phaedra. However, she is perfectly conscious of the extent to which her mistress is a victim of irrational and unnatural impulses: though fighting against destiny, the

<sup>24</sup> In the opposition between *silvae* and *urbs* Giancarlo Mazzoli envisions a correspondent opposition between two literary genres, bucolic and elegiac (2016, 95-9).

<sup>25</sup> For the empty bed, compare also *Prop.* 3.6.23, 33.

<sup>26</sup> The analogies and differences between the two passages are listed by Morelli 2004, 43-8.

<sup>27</sup> Francesco Giancotti (1986, 55-7) reads *Phaedra* in a positive, philosophically constructive light as well, but his inferences are quite different from, if not contrary to, mine. Giancotti envisions a lesson about human responsibility and free choice; I argue that Seneca’s lesson is about obeying Nature, that is, Fate. This is an unsolvable philosophical problem: suffice it to say that, in his philosophical works, Seneca overlaps freedom and determinism, for example in *Vit. beat.* 15.7 (“in regno sumus: deo parere libertas est”) and in *Epist.* 8.8 (hoc enim ipsum philosophiae servire libertas est”).

Nurse is aware, or at least suspects, that the tragedy is unavoidable. In the dramatic development carried out by the Nurse, the reader can see an irreconcilable conflict between *ratio* and *natura*. However, her stifled awareness betrays the existence of a second *ratio*, not in conflict but in accordance with the laws of Nature, coinciding stoically with Fate.

The Nurse employs a sort of titanic strength in opposing a tragedy that she knows is unavoidable. Hippolytus' false beliefs about Nature cause him to reject sexual energy, and this will cause his death; at the other extreme, Phaedra's uncontrolled erotic impulses stray from the ways of Nature, which will overwhelm her as well in the end. Perhaps the Nurse suspects from the beginning that all of this is inevitable, yet she chooses to side with those who act against Nature. The Nurse's agency contributes to Phaedra's and Hippolytus' tragedy, in fact cooperating with Nature; in turn Nature, to which the chorus chants a solemn ode (959-88), affirms its undisputed dominance through the Nurse (cf. Mazzoli 2016, 96). This is the truth about Nature: not an idyllic scenario, but one of violence, blood, and death (cf. Segal 1986, chaps. 3 and 4).

Perhaps consciously, surely reluctantly, the Nurse takes up an authorial role which is catastrophic from the point of view of the main characters, but absolutely effective from the point of view of Nature. The Nurse stands in between two polar *furores* opposing the regular course of Nature (Giancotti 1986, 27-8). Thanks to the Nurse, Nature restores its order, eliminating the disruptive forces represented by Hippolytus and Phaedra in the only possible way, their death.<sup>28</sup> Seneca's *Phaedra* is the tragedy of a plural Nature, in constant conflict with itself. Nevertheless it restores her unstable equilibrium at every step, in a process of homeostasis that nullifies the centrifugal forces produced by Nature herself.<sup>29</sup> Given the Nurse's authorial function, her role as advisor of a royal character as well as an instrument of higher forces, it is hard not to see Seneca himself lurking behind this character.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "But the gap between the different conceptions of nature expressed by Phaedra and Hippolytus cannot truly be bridged . . . both die and it is nature to win and have the final word, destroying those . . . who have been unable to live in *ὁμολογία* with her universal and unitary laws" (Mantovanelli 2008, 979, translation mine); cf. Segal 1986, 96-7. One can argue that Phaedra's death is not natural, as she commits suicide. Nevertheless Seneca in his prose works endeavours to show that suicide is not an act against nature (e.g. in *De providentia* and *Letters* 12, 58, 70, 71, just to name the most famous passages).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Boyle 1985, 1289-304; Boyle 1987, 24 ("the framework, the structure of things, *rerum natura*, remains constant"); Mazzoli 2016, 96 ("at the end of the tragedy, in fact, the anti-system has already reverted itself into the system", translation mine).

<sup>30</sup> See for instance Schmidt 1995, 290.

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