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The Nurse from Narrative to Drama: Euripides and the Tragic Deviations of an Ancient Anthropological Figure

Abstract

The essay investigates some figures of nurses in Greek tragedy, highlighting their difference in order to elicit the transformations required by the dramatic reshaping of the ancient folkloric and epic figure of the character. Starting from Eurycleia, the archetypical figure of the nurse in the *Odyssey*, the study first focuses on Cilissa, the nurse of Orestes in Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers*, then analyzes the very different Euripidean figures of Medea's Nurse, of Phaedra's Nurse in *Hippolytus* and of Hermione's Nurse in *Andromache*, highlighting their noble or high origin in contrast with a conventional line of study that classifies them among the humble characters of tragedy. Minor though not humble characters, the tragic nurses interpret from time to time the strong distinctive features of the Homeric Eurycleia: a good substitute mother is Cilissa, in conflict with the bad natural mother of Orestes in Aeschylus; the critical intelligence, almost a dramatic split of the protagonist, is the dominant trait of Medea's nurse; the self-denial of unrequited maternal love connotes Phaedra's nurse; the ambivalence bordering on servile duplicity distinguishes Hermione's nurse. Introducing into tragedy now the language of feelings and bodies, now the voice of the shared and collective ethos in contrast with the passions of the main characters, the Nurses incarnate in the great texts the feminine dimension and, better than the Pedagogues, recall the common feeling with its principles and its *gnomai*, often overcome or transgressed for political reasons.

Keywords: humble characters *vs* minor ones; body language; critical intelligence; Homer; Aeschylus; Euripides

1. In the Beginning There Was Eurycleia, the Bride *Manquée*

We all know Eurycleia. She has been in our imagination and repertoire of ancient female figures since school days. Then we met her again as an incipitary figure in Erich Auerbach's famous introductory essay in *Mimesis* devoted to the comparison between Odysseus' recognition scene in Book 19 of the *Odyssey* – the archetypical scene of Western realism, according to Auerbach – and the biblical scene of the sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis* 22.1-18 – the latter a paradigm of the symbolic tale for Auerbach, not built on realistic details and not aimed at reality, but at

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truth (1956, 3-29). For us, Eurycleia is still the emblematic figure of that recognition scene, originating in a mark on the body, in the scar that her hero received as a teenager during a boar hunt and marked the beginning of his heroic path. A connection based on a deep and long-standing physical intimacy, on a shared belonging rooted in the senses and in the immediate perception of the resemblance of the bodies and the voice, on skin contact, on the memory of nourishment given and received. It is a newly rediscovered bond which blocks Eurycleia's speech, an emotion which only emerges through body language and which the old nurse shares only with the old dog Argos. Eurycleia becomes paralysed – she lets Odysseus' foot fall into the basin – and Argos lets himself go – wagging his tail and lowering his ears, reassured and happy that he has found his master again.

ὣς οἱ μὲν τοιαῦτα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀγόρευον·
ἄν δὲ κύων κεφαλήν τε καὶ οὔατα κείμενος ἔσχεν,
Ἄργος, Ὀδυσσῆος ταλασίφρονος, ὅν ῥά ποτ' αὐτὸς
θρέψε μέν, οὐδ' ἀπόνητο, πάρος δ' εἰς Ἴλιον ἱρὴν
ᾤχετο. τὸν δὲ πάροιθεν ἀγίνεσκον νέοι ἄνδρες
αἶγας ἐπ' ἀγροτέρας ἠδὲ πρόκας ἠδὲ λαγωούς·
δὴ τότε κεῖτ' ἀπόθεστος ἀποιχομένοιο ἄνακτος,
ἐν πολλῇ κόπρῳ, ἥ οἱ προπάροιθε θυράων
ἡμιόνων τε βοῶν τε ἅλις κέχυτ', ὄφρ' ἂν ἄγοιεν
δμῶες Ὀδυσσῆος τέμενος μέγα κοπρήσοντες·
ἔνθα κύων κεῖτ' Ἄργος, ἐνίπλειος κυνοραιστέων.
δὴ τότε γ', ὡς ἐνόησεν Ὀδυσσέα ἐγγὺς ἐόντα,
οὐρῇ μέν ῥ' ὅ γ' ἔσηνε καὶ οὔατα κάββαλεν ἄμφω,
ἆσσον δ' οὐκέτ' ἔπειτα δυνήσατο οἷο ἄνακτος
ἐλθέμεν·
(17.290-304)

[Thus they spoke to one another. And a dog that lay there raised his head and pricked up his ears, Argus, steadfast Odysseus' dog, whom of old he had himself bred, but had no joy of him, for before that he went to sacred Ilium. In days past the young men were accustomed to take the dog to hunt the wild goats, and deers, and hares; but now he lay neglected, his master gone, in the deep dung of mules and cattle, which lay in heaps before the doors, till the slaves of Odysseus should take it away to manure his wide lands. There lay the dog Argus, full of dog ticks. But now, when he became aware that Odysseus was near, he wagged his tail and dropped both ears, but nearer to his master he had no longer strength to move.][1]

ἀλλ' ἄγε νῦν ἀνστᾶσα, περίφρων Εὐρύκλεια,
νίψον σοῖο ἄνακτος ὁμήλικα· καί που Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἤδη τοιόσδ' ἐστὶ πόδας τοιόσδε τε χεῖρας·

[1] All quotations from *The Odyssey* refer to Homer 1995.

αἶψα γὰρ ἐν κακότητι βροτοὶ καταγηράσκουσιν.
ὣς ἄρ᾽ ἔφη, γρηὺς δὲ κατέσχετο χερσὶ πρόσωπα,
δάκρυα δ᾽ ἔκβαλε θερμά, ἔπος δ᾽ ὀλοφυδνὸν ἔειπεν·
. . .
τῷ σε πόδας νίψω ἅμα τ᾽ αὐτῆς Πηνελοπείης
καὶ σέθεν εἵνεκ᾽, ἐπεί μοι ὀρώρεται ἔνδοθι θυμὸς
κήδεσιν. ἀλλ᾽ ἄγε νῦν ξυνίει ἔπος, ὅττι κεν εἴπω·
πολλοὶ δὴ ξεῖνοι ταλαπείριοι ἐνθάδ᾽ ἵκοντο,
ἀλλ᾽ οὔ πώ τινά φημι ἐοικότα ὧδε ἰδέσθαι
ὡς σὺ δέμας φωνήν τε πόδας τ᾽ Ὀδυσῆι ἔοικας.
. . .
ὣς ἄρ᾽ ἔφη, γρηὺς δὲ λέβηθ᾽ ἕλε παμφανόωντα
τοῦ πόδας ἐξαπένιζεν, ὕδωρ δ᾽ ἐνεχεύατο πουλὺ
ψυχρόν, ἔπειτα δὲ θερμὸν ἐπήφυσεν
. . .
νίζε δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἆσσον ἰοῦσα ἄναχθ᾽ ἑόν· αὐτίκα δ᾽ ἔγνω
οὐλήν, τήν ποτέ μιν σῦς ἤλασε λευκῷ ὀδόντι
Παρνησόνδ᾽ ἐλθόντα μετ᾽ Αὐτόλυκόν τε καὶ υἷας,
μητρὸς ἑῆς πάτερ᾽ ἐσθλόν
(19.357-95)

["Come now, wise Eurycleia, arise and wash the feet of your master's age-mate. Just such as his are now no doubt the feet of Odysseus, and such his hands, for quickly do men grow old in evil fortune." So she spoke, and the old woman hid her face in her hands, and let fall hot tears, uttering words of lamentation . . . "Therefore I will wash your feet both for Penelope's own sake and for yours, for the heart within me is stirred with sorrow. But come now, hear the word that I shall speak. Many sore-tried strangers have come here, but I declare that never yet have I seen any man so like another as you in form, and in voice, and in feet are like Odysseus." . . . So he spoke, and the old woman took the shining cauldron from which she was about to wash his feet, and poured in cold water in plenty, and then added the hot . . . So she drew near and began to wash her lord; at once she recognized the scar of the wound which long ago a boar had dealt him with his white tusk, when Odysseus had gone to Parnassus to visit Autolycus, his mother's noble father.]

τὴν γρηὺς χείρεσσι καταπρηνέσσι λαβοῦσα
γνῶ ῥ᾽ ἐπιμασσαμένη, πόδα δὲ προέηκε φέρεσθαι·
ἐν δὲ λέβητι πέσε κνήμη, κανάχησε δὲ χαλκός,
ἂψ δ᾽ ἐτέρωσ᾽ ἐκλίθη· τὸ δ᾽ ἐπὶ χθονὸς ἐξέχυθ᾽ ὕδωρ.
τὴν δ᾽ ἅμα χάρμα καὶ ἄλγος ἕλε φρένα, τὼ δέ οἱ ὄσσε
δακρυόφι πλῆσθεν, θαλερὴ δέ οἱ ἔσχετο φωνή.
ἁψαμένη δὲ γενείου Ὀδυσσῆα προσέειπεν·
ἦ μάλ᾽ Ὀδυσσεύς ἐσσι, φίλον τέκος· οὐδέ σ᾽ ἐγώ γε
πρὶν ἔγνων, πρὶν πάντα ἄνακτ᾽ ἐμὸν ἀμφαφάασθαι.

ἦ καὶ Πηνελόπειαν ἐσέδρακεν ὀφθαλμοῖσι,
πεφραδέειν ἐθέλουσα φίλον πόσιν ἔνδον ἐόντα.
ἡ δ' οὔτ' ἀθρῆσαι δύνατ' ἀντίη οὔτε νοῆσαι·
τῇ γὰρ Ἀθηναίη νόον ἔτραπεν· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
χεῖρ' ἐπιμασσάμενος φάρυγος λάβε δεξιτερῇφι,
τῇ δ' ἑτέρῃ ἔθεν ἆσσον ἐρύσσατο φώνησέν τε·
μαῖα, τίη μ' ἐθέλεις ὀλέσαι; σὺ δέ μ' ἔτρεφες αὐτὴ
τῷ σῷ ἐπὶ μαζῷ·
(19.443-67)

[This scar the old woman, when she had taken his leg in the flat of her hands, remembered when she felt it, and she let his leg fall. Into the basin his lower leg fell, and the bronze rang. It tipped over, and the water was spilled on the ground. Then upon her heart came joy and grief at the same moment, and her eyes were filled with tears and her voice caught in her throat. She touched the chin of Odysseus, and said: "Surely you are Odysseus, dear child, and I did not know you, until I had handled all the body of my master". She spoke, and with her eyes looked toward Penelope, wanting to show her that her dear husband was at home. But Penelope could not meet her glance nor understand, for Athene had turned her thoughts aside. But Odysseus, feeling for the woman's throat, seized it with his right hand, and with the other drew her closer to him, and said: "Mother, why will you destroy me? You yourself nursed me at this your own breast."]

But Eurycleia does not inhabit that famous recognition scene only. Her character appears throughout the whole poem – she shows up in Book 1, 2, 4, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 – and, when she acts, she is crucial for determining the events in the palace as well as the plot. Eurycleia, rather than Penelope, is the confidant and accomplice of young Telemachus: she keeps the secret of his journey to find his father and helps him get started, she warns him that the suitors will steal his wealth in his absence, she prepares the gifts of wine and cheese for the hosts who will receive him (*Od.* 2.337-412); she is the first to welcome him on his return (*Od.* 17.31-5). She provides the young prince of Ithaca with the same care and affection she had devoted to her first prince, the new-born baby whom she had welcomed in her arms when she was young (*Od.* 19.354-5) and whom she had placed on the knees of Autolycus, who had come to Ithaca just after his birth to give him a name and mark his identity (*Od.* 19.399-412).[2] Since before Odysseus' birth up until his return,

[2] Euryclea's act of placing the child on the knees of his maternal grandfather for the imposition of the name – in the name of his nephew, Ὀδυσεύς, the grandfather asks for the perpetuation of the hatred, ὀδυσσαμένος, he feels for many men and women – has no parallel in Greek literature. The nurse's act, however, recalls the ritual of *Amphidromia*, attested at Athens (cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 160 E), in which the father, preceded by two nurses, quickly leads the newborn around the domestic fireplace, *hestia*, and inte-

after ten years at war and ten years of endless travels, she has remained an integral part of the house that she knows and supervises, the house she had entered with the honour due to a young bride, bought by Laertes for the price of twenty oxen, according to the traditional rule of bridal gifts (*hedna*)[3] given by the bridegroom to the bride's father or tutor.

> Τηλέμαχος δ', ὅθι οἱ θάλαμος περικαλλέος αὐλῆς
> ὑψηλὸς δέδμητο περισκέπτῳ ἐνὶ χώρῳ,
> ἔνθ' ἔβη εἰς εὐνὴν πολλὰ φρεσὶ μερμηρίζων.
> τῷ δ' ἄρ' ἅμ' αἰθομένας δαΐδας φέρε κεδνὰ ἰδυῖα
> Εὐρύκλει', Ὦπος θυγάτηρ Πεισηνορίδαο,
> τήν ποτε Λαέρτης πρίατο κτεάτεσσιν ἑοῖσιν
> πρωθήβην ἔτ' ἐοῦσαν, ἐεικοσάβοια δ' ἔδωκεν,
> ἶσα δέ μιν κεδνῇ ἀλόχῳ τίεν ἐν μεγάροισιν,
> εὐνῇ δ' οὔ ποτ' ἔμικτο, χόλον δ' ἀλέεινε γυναικός·
> ἥ οἱ ἅμ' αἰθομένας δαΐδας φέρε, καί ἑ μάλιστα
> δμῳάων φιλέεσκε, καὶ ἔτρεφε τυτθὸν ἐόντα.
> ὤιξεν δὲ θύρας θαλάμου πύκα ποιητοῖο,
> ἕζετο δ' ἐν λέκτρῳ, μαλακὸν δ' ἔκδυνε χιτῶνα·
> καὶ τὸν μὲν γραίης πυκιμηδέος ἔμβαλε χερσίν.
> ἡ μὲν τὸν πτύξασα καὶ ἀσκήσασα χιτῶνα,
> πασσάλῳ ἀγκρεμάσασα παρὰ τρητοῖσι λέχεσσι
> βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν ἐκ θαλάμοιο, θύρην δ' ἐπέρυσσε κορώνῃ
> ἀργυρέῃ, ἐπὶ δὲ κληῖδ' ἐτάνυσσεν ἱμάντι.
> ἔνθ' ὅ γε παννύχιος, κεκαλυμμένος οἰὸς ἀώτῳ,
> βούλευε φρεσὶν ᾗσιν ὁδὸν τὴν πέφραδ' Ἀθήνη.
> (1.425-44)

> [But Telemachus, where his chamber was built in the beautiful court, high, in a place with a surrounding view, there he went to his bed, pondering many things in his mind; and with him, bearing blazing torches, went true-hearted Eurycleia, daughter of Ops, son of Peisenor. Her long ago Laertes had bought

grates him into the household, giving him a name and a social identity. Eurycleia's assumption of Odysseus' social recognition, a role historically entrusted to the father, confirms the nurse's privileged relationship with the father of the child, who chooses her and immediately gives her the new-born, as specified also by Cilissa, Orestes' nurse, in *Libation-Bearers*, 762. On the *Amphidromia* ceremony, see Burkert 2003, 464-5.

[3] The Chorus of the Oceanids refers to the ἕδνα offered by the bridegroom in order to win the bride in Aeschylus' *Prometheus* 559. The word recurs several times in Euripides' *Andromache* and always means an exchange of marriage gifts (2, 153, 873), though here in the sense of a female dowry given by fathers to the bridegrooms' families on the occasion of Andromache's wedding with Hector and Hermione's wedding with Neoptolemus.

> with his wealth, when she was in her first youth, and gave for her the price of twenty oxen; and he honored her even as he honored his faithful wife in his halls, but he never lay with her in love, for he avoided the wrath of his wife. She it was who bore for Telemachus the blazing torches; for she of all the handmaids loved him most, and had nursed him when he was a child. He opened the doors of the well-built chamber, sat down on the bed, and took off his soft tunic and laid it in the wise old woman's hands. And she folded and smoothed the tunic and hung it on a peg beside the corded bedstead, and then went forth from the chamber, drawing the door to by its silver handle, and driving the bolt home with the thong. So there, the night through, wrapped in a fleece of wool, he pondered in his mind the journey that Athene had shown him.]

In the poem which survives, in a scene of the first book no less accurate and no less rich in realistic details than the more famous recognition scene, Eurycleia is already there to set the story in motion with her noble name suggesting 'wide fame', as a strong and distinctive presence in Ithaca's palace. The bard specifies her origins and social status, mentioning the name of her father and that of the father of her father. Although she plays a servile role in the palace, Eurycleia is introduced by the narrator not as a slave but as a chosen bride and a bride *manquée*: Laertes does not share his bed with her, but he entrusts her with the task of feeding and caring for the new-born, choosing her as a surrogate, symbolic mother to the future lord of Ithaca.[4] Moreover, in her constant role as a mother, a crucial figure for the transmission of power from father to son in theogonic myths[5] and for legitimacy in aristocratic societies, Eurycleia participates in the decisions, conflicts and preparations for Odysseus' revenge, taking care, when the deed has been done, to inform Penelope, who is excluded from the knowledge of the plot. It is she who comforts Penelope about her son's secret voyage in search of his father; it is she who urges Penelope to spare old Laertes the news of Telemachus' absence and thus an additional grief (*Od.* 4.742-57); it is she who announces to Penelope the return of her husband (*Od.* 23.1-84), though only after sharing and supporting Odysseus' plan to exterminate the suitors and kill the unfaithful maids (*Od.* 19.485-502) after closing, according to Telemachus' order, the doors leading to the halls chosen for the contest of the bow and the massacre (*Od.* 20, 21 and 22). Finally, she is the one who acts as an intermediary between the men's hall and the women's apartments, between lords and servants.

[4] In Eurycleia's dialogues with Telemachus and Odysseus there are many appellations for son, τέκνον, φίλον τέκος, and nurse, μαῖα.

[5] According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Kronos, with the aid of his mother Gaia, castrates his father Ouranos and usurps his throne (137-82). Then Zeus, thanks to his mother Rhea, is saved from his father Kronos, who had swallowed his other children; he kills him and assumes kingship (453-506).

Wisdom, cleverness, elective belonging to the household she serves, physical intimacy rooted in the nourishment and care of the children who have grown into men, in the direct contact with their bodies, ability to admonish, trust and complicit loyalty: throughout the narrative Eurycleia epitomises and interprets the distinguishing features that make the nurse a relevant figure in Homeric society[6] and the archetype of the tragic nurses of Attic drama. The latter are all better than Eurycleia, different one from another, each constructed on the dominance of one feature over others; one in particular, Hermione's nurse in Euripides' *Andromache*, is characterised by conflicting and strongly innovative features, namely disapproval of and ill-concealed detachment from the princess, violence against Andromache and her coward father Menelaus.

2. "She put on a sorrowful face-concealing the laughter that is underneath":[7] the Good and the Evil Mother

Thus Cilissa, Orestes' nurse, exposes her protégé's mother while addressing the women of the Chorus: Clytemnestra, who, with the aid of her lover Aegisthus, killed her bridegroom Agamemnon after his victory at Troy, lives in dread of her son's revenge and rejoices in relief at the news of his death. It is the climax of *The Libation-Bearers*, the central play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. It is also the emotional peak of the trilogy, when tension is overwhelming at the peak of the tension. Orestes and Pylades arrive at the palace in Argos, Orestes pays homage to his father's tomb, the Electra-Orestes recognition takes place, with Electra informing him during the *kommos* about her unfortunate fate as an outcast and about the triumph of the two usurping assassins, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Pretending to be strangers who had come to bring the news of Orestes' death, Orestes and Pylades had entered the palace through deception to commit matricide and avenge Agamemnon; while Clytemnestra feigns despair, Cilissa, Orestes' good substitute mother, exposes her duplicity by revealing to the women of the Chorus the ill-concealed joy that shone in the queen's eyes behind her grief-stricken façade:

ΚΙΛΙΣΣΑ
Αἴγισθον ἡ κρατοῦσα τοῖς ξένοις καλεῖν
ὅπως τάχιστ' ἄνωγεν, ὡς σαφέστερον
ἀνὴρ ἀπ' ἀνδρὸς τὴν νεάγγελτον φάτιν

[6] Although stratified and poetically composite (Snodgrass 1974), Homeric society maintains some constants in the palatial environments and in the recurring figures, by definition long-lasting components.

[7] Nurse: Πρὸς μὲν οἰκέτας / θέτο σκυθρωπὸν ὄμμα, τὸν γ'ἐντὸς γέλων / κεύθουσ' (*Libation-Bearers* 737-9).

ἐλθὼν πύθηται τήνδε. πρὸς μὲν οἰκέτας
θέτο σκυθρωπὸν ὄμμα, τόν γ᾽ ἐντὸς γέλων
κεύθουσ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἔργοις διαπεπραγμένοις καλῶς
κείνῃ, δόμοις δὲ τοῖσδε παγκάκως ἔχει
φήμης ὕφ᾽ ἧς ἤγγειλαν οἱ ξένοι τορῶς.
ἦ δὴ κλυὼν ἐκεῖνος εὐφρανεῖ νόον,
εὖτ᾽ ἂν πύθηται μῦθον. ὦ τάλαιν᾽ ἐγώ·
ὡς μοι τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ συγκεκραμένα
ἄλγη δύσοιστα τοῖσδ᾽ ἐν Ἀτρέως δόμοις
τυχόντ᾽ ἐμὴν ἤλγυνεν ἐν στέρνοις φρένα,
ἀλλ᾽ οὔ τί πω τοιόνδε πῆμ᾽ ἀνεσχόμην.
τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τλημόνως ἤντλουν κακά·
φίλον δ᾽ Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν,
ὃν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη,
καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων ὀρθίων κελευμάτων
. . .
καὶ πολλὰ καὶ μοχθήρ᾽ ἀνωφέλητ᾽ ἐμοὶ
τλάσῃ· τὸ μὴ φρονοῦν γὰρ ὡσπερεὶ βοτὸν
τρέφειν ἀνάγκη - πῶς γὰρ οὔ; - τροφοῦ φρενί·
οὐ γάρ τι φωνεῖ παῖς ἐτ᾽ ὢν ἐν σπαργάνοις
εἰ λιμός, ἢ δίψη τις, ἢ λιψουρία
ἔχει· νέα δὲ νηδὺς αὐτάρχης τέκνων.
τούτων πρόμαντις οὖσα, πολλὰ δ᾽ οἴομαι
ψευσθεῖσα, παιδὸς σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια,
κναφεὺς τροφεύς τε ταὐτὸν εἰχέτην τέλος.
ἐγὼ διπλᾶς δὴ τάσδε χειρωναξίας
ἔχουσ᾽ Ὀρέστην ἐξεθρεψάμην πατρί·
τεθνηκότος δὲ νῦν τάλαινα πεύθομαι.
(734-65)

[The mistress has ordered me to summon Aegisthus as quickly as possible to see the visitors, so that he can come and learn about this newly-reported information more clearly, man from man. In front of the servants she put on a sorrowful face-concealing the laughter that is underneath on account of the event that has come to pass, which is good thing for her, but for this house things are thoroughly bad, as a result of the news that the visitors have reported very plainly . . . O wretched me! For I found the old griefs that have happened in this house of Atreus hard enough to bear, all mixed together as they were, and they pained my heart within my breast; but I have never yet had to endure a sorrow like this. Under the other troubles I patiently bore up. But dear Orestes, who wore away my life with toil, whom I reared after receiving him straight from his mother's womb! (Over and over again I heard) his shrill, imperative cries, which forced me to wander around at night (and perform) many disagreeable tasks which I had to endure and which did me no good. A child without intelligence must needs be reared like an animal –

> how could it be otherwise? – by the intelligence of his nurse; when he's still an infant in swaddling clothes he can't speak all if he's in the grip of hunger or thirst, say, or of an urge to make water – and the immature bowel pf small children is its own master. I had to divine these things in advance, and often, I fancy, I was mistaken, and as a cleaner of the baby's wrappings – well, a launderer and a caterer were holding the same post. Practising both these two crafts, I reared up Orestes for his father; and now, to my misery, I lean that he is dead! And I am going for the man who has abused and wrecked this house – and this is news he'll be pleased to learn.][8]

The first tragic figure of *trophos* known to us does not contradict the epic model of Eurycleia at all. However, unlike Eurycleia, who has a name that suggests high lineage and stands beside the lords of Ithaca with the authority of a bride *manquée* and an elective mother more influential than any legitimate wife, Cilissa, who bears a name indicating a stranger or maybe a prisoner of war, is only an extraneous witness to the crimes committed at the palace. She has suffered the horror of these crimes, even though she never played any direct part in them. Unlike Eurycleia, the lady of affections and intrigues, Cilissa has no ties with Agamemnon's house except with Orestes, whom she nurtured and cared for.

From the complex character of Eurycleia, the paradigmatic Nurse, Cilissa only inherits the maternal protective function, thanks to breast-feeding, which in the ancients' imagination is much more binding than actual pregnancy.[9] And it is through breast-feeding and nourishment that the alien Cilissa is endowed by Aeschylus with strong tragic hues and placed at the core of the conflicts contaminating the basic structures of kinship and birth ties. Her opposition to Clytemnestra dramatises, perhaps for the first time in Western drama and literature, the ambivalence of motherhood. The two women living under the same roof embody the first, conflicting images of the good and the evil mother. Clytemnestra and Cilissa are both related to milk, which in the nurse is associated with life and nurture, although in the mother it takes the colour of blood and death. Cilissa, to whom Agamemnon entrusted his son at the moment of birth, remembers the child she nourished, cleaned and nurtured with genuine

[8] All quotations from this play refer to Aeschylus 2009.

[9] Vilatte (1991, 10-13) believes, even against lexical evidence, that in Ancient Greece breast-feeding was an exclusive task of mothers, claiming that the young virginal age or old age of the Greek nurses known to us was incompatible to breast-feeding. Pedrucci (2015, 36 and 37-43), on the basis of literary and medical texts, both Greek and Roman, takes a more cautious view, embracing the hypothesis of the co-existence of maternal nursing and wet-nursing also in Greece where wet-nursing was less common, but where kinship based on breast milk, regarded by Hippocratic doctors and Aristotle as equivalent to blood and male sperm, was acknowledged. On the strong symbolic meaning of the breasts compared with that of the womb, see Castellaneta 2013.

fondness in spite of not being his biological mother. Instead, Clytemnestra, sent offerings to Agamemnon's tomb in the throes of a scary nightmare in which she gives birth to a snake which sucks clots of blood together with her milk (523-33). Then, when she is about to be killed, she reiterates the maternal gesture *par excellence*:[10] she bares her breast and begs Orestes for mercy, but he cannot remember the sweet act of suckling: he only remembers the shame of being sent away and left to wretchedness when he was a child (900-13).

In her brief speech, Cilissa presents herself as a figure of compensation: by looking after the child ousted from Clytemnestra's womb, she replaces the mother who killed the father of her children in order to conquer the throne and the royal bed, who justified uxoricide as a revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia and yet did not hesitate to push her surviving children away – this is what Electra screams in the *kommos* (444-5), before Orestes holds it against her while stabbing her to death – one who disowned her children and obliged them to play second fiddle to her own well-being, one who killed them at least in a symbolic way.

The second and central play of the *Oresteia*, constructed on the disintegration of the deepest blood and family bonds, culminates in the extreme crime of matricide while exposing the process of corruption of motherhood in the queen, who combines and confuses maternity and power, political lie and crime. At the same time it deconstructs the mother; as in a mirror structure it provides the character of the Nurse with the features of tenderness, reliability and authenticity of emotions. Cilissa, the nurse who outclasses the mother-stepmother, suggests that elective relations are surpassing family relations as a new order in society and affections is about to emerge, at the dawn of the 'modern' world ushered and founded by Athena on the social and political pact at the end of *Eumenides*.[11]

3. "Everyone had voice, the woman and the slave and the master . . . Mine was a democratic theatre"[12]

Thus, according to Aristophanes, Euripides defends his drama in the deba-

[10] This *topos* can be traced back to Homer (*Il.* 22.82-3), to the image of Hecuba exposing her breast to Hector, as she implores him to have respect for and perhaps also awe, αἴδεο, of it, and desist from fighting Achilles. As Lanza observes (1995, 35), the reference to the Homeric passage in the *The Libation-Bearers* (896-7) is made clear precisely through Clytemnestra's use of the same untranslatable verb, while, with the same gesture, she tries to prevent her son from stabbing her to death, τόνδε αἴδεσαι, τέκνον, μαστόν. On the repetition of this motif see also Euripides, *Electra* 1206-7, and *Orestes* 526-7 and 839-43.

[11] On the new order established by Athena. see Nikolai (2009-2010).

[12] Euripides: ἀλλ' ἔλεγεν ἡ γυνή τε μοι χὠ δοῦλος οὐδὲν ἧττον / χὠ δεσπότης . . . δημοκρατικὸν γὰρ αὖτ' ἔδρων (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 949-52).

te with Aeschylus in the *Frogs* (948-52), the sensational comedy of 406 BC which employs the play within the play device and weaves together poetry and politics. The line is surprising and has been interpreted in several ways. A number of commentators and interpreters still anachronistically project the features of inclusion and openness which, at least theoretically, belong to modern democracies, onto Athenian democracy and in so doing they miss Euripides' contradiction. This interpretation is confirmed by the long-standing *lectio facilior* which ascribes to Euripides a theatre of the humble, which includes nurses and pedagogues, in line with an enlarged political system.[13] However, as Edith Hall rightly argues in her seminal 1997 study on the sociology of tragedy, Athenian democracy was not inclusive at all, not even in the radical forms of the post-Periclean demagogues. Women, slaves – precisely the categories mentioned by Euripides – and foreigners, including rich metics, were not granted full political rights. So how should we interpret the line attributed to Euripides by Aristophanes? Can we agree with Hall (1997, 125) in recognising the comic poet's insight that tragic theatre, and especially Euripidean drama, tended to anticipate historical democracy by deploying and representing those voices as yet excluded from public debate?

In the light of historiography and of what remains of the Euripidean production, the line is not only contradictory but also heavily antiphrastic and provocative. Euripides does not stage the humble, but rather the disgraced and the marginalised of Athenian democracy.[14] The nurses we know from Homer are neither humble nor socially low. In the archaic *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the titular goddess was a magic and terrible nurse when, disguised as an old woman who had recently lost her own child, she entered the palace of the king of Eleusis as a nurse for his son Demophoon, whom she had tried to make immortal by nightly immersing him into the fire.[15] Both Eurycleia's name and patronymic prove her noble origins. But also her opposite, the evil nurse who had sold young prince Eumaeus into slavery, condemning him to become a servant working in a pigsty in Ithaca, was a princess. Eumaeus tells Odysseus her story, which is in part his own story, before recognising him: some Phoenician merchants had come to the house of his rich father, the king of the prosperous island of Syria, and one of them had seduced his nurse, the beautiful woman from Sidon who when a girl had been kidnapped by Taphian pirates and sold to Syrian lords. She had been promised by the merchants that they would take her back to her home town and, in turn, she

[13] On the 'humility' of minor characters and their elemental wisdom, see Grillone 1979 and Castagna 2007.

[14] On the so-called realism of Euripides, see Sonnino 2021.

[15] On the ambivalence of the nurse often endowed with magical thinking, see Mencacci 1995.

had secretly vowed to give them all the gold and the most precious treasure she could steal from the palace, the young Eumaeus, who had been entrusted to her care by the king and who in turn would be sold to Laertes (*Od.* 15.403-53). Even Hypsipyle from the homonymous Euripidean tragedy, the nurse to the little Opheltes in the palace of Lycurgus at Nemea, had been queen of Lemnos. Neither are the pedagogues who take care of many generations of the same family, moving from fathers to sons and from the role of tutors to that of faithful advisors of their pupils, of humble origins.[16]

Euripides' nurses and pedagogues, just like the peasant farmer, ἀυτουργός, the husband of Electra in the eponymous tragedy and the one who addresses the assembly in *Orestes* (917-22), one who seldom "visits the city and the circle of the *agora*", cannot be mistaken as voices of democracy.[17] Rather, they are the voices of dissent or of the lack of moderation due to unscrupulous political experiments that frequently escalate into infighting.

Those voices repeatedly classified by the critical tradition as the voices of the 'humble' in the Euripidean drama recirculate an ancient knowledge, a conservative and in many ways regressive – though still widely shared – *ethos*. A subdued common and current wisdom which coincides neither with the aristocratic maximalism of the heroic code nor with political democratic extremism. It rather agrees with the arguments of Aristophanes' farmers, nostalgic for peace, celebrations and the marketplace, less bound to the city than to traditions and the soil, extraneous and averse to the passions of heroes and demagogues, mainly concerned with the material wealth wrecked by war. These are the voices which Euripides intercepts together with his contemporary Aristophanes, who represents them in a comic and parodic way, both anticipating the *Oeconomicus* of the pro-Spartan Xenophon, with its praise of rural lords, very good at managing their own property, the *kalokagathoi* to whom it would be appropriate to entrust also the management of public goods. Whether family property or inheritance, figures of memory or of critical consciousness within families, in the mode of mentors or al-

[16] Such is the pedagogue who, through different dramatic strategies, allows for the Electra-Orestes recognition in both Euripides' and Sophocles' *Electra*, such is the pedagogue of Creusa in *Ion* and the one in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, who accompanies Clytemnestra to Agamemnon's house at the request of her father. On the continuity and contiguity between the figure of the nurse and that of the pedagogue that converge in the novel, see Alaux and Létoublon 2001.

[17] *Electra* 1-53: the farmer tells the backstory in the Prologue and welcomes the two strangers, 341-431. Electra says that he is poor, πένης, but noble and respectful, γενναῖος καὶ εὐσεβής. The dialogue with him gives Orestes the opportunity, just before the recognition scene between brother and sister, to make a long speech, 367-400, about the main features of these free men excluded from politics, endowed with autonomy of thought and an underrated ability to moderate. On the potentialities – also political – of small farmers in opposition to demagogues, see Di Benedetto 1971, 205-11.

lies of princes and princesses, whom they almost always support with unconditioned dedication in the attempt to protect them against dangers and mitigate their excesses and *hybris*, nurses and pedagogues frequently recur in Euripidean drama. However, despite the stability of their function, they enter the drama carrying with them different dramatic values and meanings, speaking different languages with diverse emotional tones, characterised in gender terms as male or female. What changes in the nurses whose function and meaning we can better understand and who come from the same period of Euripides' career, the years between 431 and 425-424 BC, during the first stage of the Peloponnesian War? How do Medea's nurse, Phaedra's nurse in *Hippolytus* and Hermione's nurse in *Andromache* relate to each other?

4. "I know her and fear her":[18] Intelligence and Doubling

This is line 39 in *Medea*'s Prologue, a melodramatic overture, highly crafted both metrically and lexically, on which anapaests for alternating voices are seamlessly grafted, taking the place of the *parodos*, the traditional recitative or chorus's entry. The Nurse is the dominant and connective figure of this score: the slow movement opens with the Nurse's soliloquy in iambic trimetres, the metre most akin to everyday language (1-48). This turns into a dialogue when the old Pedagogue arrives on stage with Medea's children (49-95); then it becomes more agitated with the anapaestic exchange initiated by Medea's lyrical lamentations (96-7 and 111-14) heard from within the palace, to which the Nurse replies by trying to restrain her queen with a slower and more gnomic recitative (98-110 and 115-30). When the Chorus of Corinthian women enters the scene, it explodes into a desperate chant with the alternating voices of the Chorus, the Nurse and Medea, who casts curses and invokes death from off-stage (131-210). The Nurse moves from scene to scene through spoken lines to recitative (see Cerbo 1997, 116n33), a technically difficult role that Euripides may have attributed to the leading actor. Starting with the first episode and after the Nurse's final exit, he would probably take on the role of Medea, the tragedy's absolute protagonist.[19]

[18] . . . ἐγῷδα τήνδε, δειμαίνω τέ νιν (*Medea* 39).

[19] Di Benedetto-Medda (1997, 223) recommend the role of Medea for the first actor and that of the Nurse for the second actor, relying on the co-presence of Medea, as a voice from backstage which interacts on stage with the Nurse starting from the prologue and the *parodos*. However, taking into account the scarceness of Medea's interventions (2 and 4 lines in the prologue, 4+8 lines in the *parodos*) and the different changes that the voice could assume while reaching the audience from the interior of the palace, it is highly probable that the character of the protagonist was played at the beginning by the second actor and then, starting from the first episode, by the first actor who had been busy with the very dynamic role of the Nurse.

But who was Medea's Nurse? Where did this character, whom Euripides employs to start such an accurate and vivid drama, even shocking to his contemporaries and all future spectators, come from? There is something contradictory and surprising in Medea's Nurse, the only character who calls her by the appellation of "daughter" or "my child" while she addresses Medea's children as "children" with a blend of tenderness and anguish (89, 98, 118). There is something that tells her apart from other Euripidean nurses, inextricably bound to the women they raised and therefore totally empathetic towards the events concerning their ladies, their desires, fears, passions, even when they did not approve them.

In the opening monologue, the Nurse confirms a deep knowledge of Medea, her "lady" (6). In the first 15 lines, with a counterfactual invocation (Mastronarde 2002, 161) meant to nullify the queen's choices and subvert the story of her union with Jason and her journey to Greece, she summarises the backstory of the ongoing conflict, analyses its causes and even goes as far as to predict its dreadful consequences in light of what she knows about the protagonist, her temperament and her past. When he comes onto stage, the old Pedagogue, her "fellow slave" (σύνδουλος, 65), addresses her as "old household slave of my mistress" (παλαιὸν οἴκων κτῆμα δεσποίνης ἐμῆς, 49), while conversely, almost to highlight their different conditions, he is addressed as "old servant of Jason's children, τέκνων ὀπαδὲ πρέσβυ τῶν Ἰάσονος" (53) and thus separated from the childhood and youth of his master. The Pedagogue also asks why Medea wants to be left alone, without her Nurse (52, πῶς σοῦ μόνη Μήδεια λείπεσθαι θέλει;).

No doubt, Euripides hints at a long-standing habit existing between the Nurse and Medea. He allows us to imagine that the Nurse too comes from Colchis and that she followed Medea in her long journey riddled with dangers and transgressions (31-5), but he makes her speak in Greek. Not only because he endows her, according to the general tragic code, with an excellent and poetic Attic dialect with interwoven figures of speech and sound, but above all because he attributes to her an ethos totally in line with the Greek common sense, which emerges especially in the frequent *gnomai* used as comments on the events.

The Nurse shares Medea's grief and cries it out to Heaven and Earth (56-7); she condemns Jason's betrayal and reveals it to the children (82-4), although she provides a negative image of Medea. Harrowed by the tragedy she senses about to explode and to crush the whole family, including herself, the Nurse describes Medea as being prostrated, weak, ἄσιτος (24) and yet dreadful, δεινή (44), in the throes of a pain which transforms her: into a stone or a sea wave, into a beast with the eyes of a bull or a lioness just unburdened (91-2 and 187-9). Then, from the moment she hears the feral cries of the lady inside the palace, with a sequence of imperatives she tries to

protect the children, to keep them away from her (100-5) and her wild temperament, from the hideous nature of a mind which knows no limit (ἄγριον ἦθος στυγεράν τε φύσιν φρενὸς αὐθαδοῦς, 103-4), from an implacable viscerality (μεγαλόσπλαγχνος δυσκατάπαυστος ψυχὴ δηχθεῖσα κακοῖσιν, 109-10) which, if offended, might explode in unpredictable ways. Finally, after Medea curses her children and their father (100-14), the Nurse concludes the anapeastic contrast with a condemnation of the 'tyrannical' desires which do not metabolise anger and with an appeal to moderation scattered with echoes of the most traditional Delphian and Socratic principles, the best antidotes to the most serious disasters caused by excess.

ΤΡΟΦΟΣ
ἰώ μοί μοι, ἰὼ τλήμων.
τί δέ σοι παῖδες πατρὸς ἀμπλακίας
μετέχουσι; τί τούσδ' ἔχθεις; οἴμοι,
τέκνα, μή τι πάθηθ' ὡς ὑπεραλγῶ.
δεινὰ τυράννων λήματα καί πως
ὀλίγ' ἀρχόμενοι, πολλὰ κρατοῦντες
χαλεπῶς ὀργὰς μεταβάλλουσιν.
τὸ γὰρ εἰθίσθαι ζῆν ἐπ' ἴσοισιν
κρεῖσσον· ἐμοὶ γοῦν ἐπὶ μὴ μεγάλοις
ὀχυρῶς τ' εἴη καταγηράσκειν.
τῶν γὰρ μετρίων πρῶτα μὲν εἰπεῖν
τοὔνομα νικᾷ, χρῆσθαί τε μακρῷ
λῷστα βροτοῖσιν· τὰ δ' ὑπερβάλλοντ'
οὐδένα καιρὸν δύναται θνητοῖς,
μείζους δ' ἄτας, ὅταν ὀργισθῇ
δαίμων οἴκοις, ἀπέδωκεν.
(115-30)

[Oh, woe is me! Why do you make the children sharers in their father's sin? Why do you hate them? O children, how terrified I am that you may come to harm. The minds of royalty are dangerous: since they often command and seldom obey, they lay aside their angry moods with difficulty. It is better to be accustomed to live on terms of equality. At any rate, may I be able to grow old in modest state and with security. For moderate fortune has a name that is fairest on the tongue, and in practice it is by far the most beneficial thing for mortals. But excessive riches mean no advantage for mortals, and when a god is angry at a house, they make the ruin greater.][20]

With excellent dramatic vision, Euripides creates a version of the Nurse who avoids assuming maternal tones towards her lady in order to adopt them only towards her children, who never resorts to the motif of nourishment

[20] All quotations from this play refer to Euripides 1994.

and milk kinship; the semantic field of τρέφειν never recurs in her lines. This Nurse is never an expansion of the queen and her will, she is never her accomplice and never her antagonist. Between the two characters there seems to be a subtler and more refined game, a relationship which Euripides might have perfected also by employing the first actor for the two consecutive roles of Nurse and Medea, the protagonist who dominates the scene until the exodus. United by the same tone of voice, the most important channel of ancient acting – the habit of using heavy masks and costumes hindered the use of facial mimicry and limited the actors' gestures – the two women can be imagined by the spectators as two faces of the same split character anticipating the conflict between passion and reason, θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων (1079), with which Medea's famous monologue ends and which over the centuries would become the hallmark of her indelible style (1019-80).

Probably arrived from the same elsewhere, both the Nurse and Medea tried to adapt themselves to the Greek common feeling and Medea, while helping Jason, also tried to appease the Corinthian people who had welcomed her (ἀνδάνουσα ὧν ἀφίκετο χθόνα . . . πάντα ξυμφέρουσ᾽ Ἰάσον, 11-13). Then the two characters diverge, the Nurse becomes the spokesperson of Greek reason and the principle of moderation while Medea, in confronting Jason, proudly claims her complete and irreducible diversity (Ἡ πολλὰ πολλοῖς εἰμι διάφορος βροτῶν, 579). Two women who interact with the children with the same heart-wrenching affection, but with a different capacity to rule their passions? Only one broken woman? A conflict between two viewpoints, one that, at moments of extreme difficulty clings to a sort of delirium of omnipotence, and another reflecting common sense? Two temperaments or one single flow of consciousness, torn to shreds by moments of doubt, disapproval and paranoiac assertiveness sustained by the same unmistakable voice?

5. "I fed you and I love you":[21] Abnegation and Life

With this statement of maternal affection which exists eternally and will not be broken, not even by Phaedra's reproaches and curses, the role of the old Nurse in the drama comes to an end (695-701 and 704-5). Feeling betrayed by her breaking the vow of silence and secrecy, Phaedra wishes her to die and rudely sends her away (ἀλλ᾽ ἐκποδῶν ἄπελθε καὶ σαυτῆς πέρι φρόντιζε, 708-9), just before announcing to the Chorus her death, which will mark the triumph of Cypris but will also drag someone else – Hippolytus, whose

[21] Ἔθρεψά σ᾽εὔνους τ᾽εἰμί (*Hippolytus* 698).

name Phaedra never pronounces – into ruin at the end of the second episode (724-31).

The two tragedies, *Medea* of 431 BC and *Hippolytus* of 428 BC, are chronologically close and both revolve around the important theme of irreducible diversity, which can never be entirely conformable to the order of the democratic city and its political dynamics. Medea, who according to her Nurse had tried to adapt herself to the Greek world, in the course of the story declares, through words and through gestures, her diversity, which is not only ethnic but also individual. As she reveals in her long speech to the women of the Chorus (373-430), Phaedra had tried in many ways to adapt herself to the city of her husband Theseus and to the Athenian rule of decency, discretion, αἰδώς,[22] as well as of feminine honesty, σωφρροσύνη: she had initially denied being lovesick, νόσος, withholding and hiding it, she had then tried to defeat madness, ἄνοια, through self-control. Eventually, unable to dominate that shameful and insane passion, νόσον δυσκλεᾶ (405), for her stepson Hippolytus, she had decided to die to avoid embarrassing her husband and children, in order to preserve their freedom of thought and speech in Athens. Phaedra understood something that she had already made clear in the disjointed and reticent revelation that had shocked the Nurse: in a jumble of words and ghosts that spoke the unspeakable, she had revealed that her illicit and ruinous love had a distant origin, in Crete, where her mother had fallen in love with the bull, the beast, and her sister Ariadne had married the god Dionysus (337-41). Unlike Phaedra, Hippolytus, the Amazon's son, does not complain about his non-conformity, but instead shows himself proud of it, through the rules of a life lived in woods and unspoiled meadows, remembering his mother and worshipping the chaste Artemis, as well as through words, such as when he responds to the Nurse's revelation that Phaedra loves him and to the accusations made by his father, who had believed in the false accusation written by Phaedra on a tablet tied to her wrist before her suicide by hanging . Speaking to the nurse, Hippolytus gives vent to his hatred of women, the bane of mankind; he wishes that children could be bought by bringing offerings to the temples rather than begetting them with women (616-24); he confirms to his father that he has a pure soul (παρθένον ψυχὴν ἔχων, 1006) and that he is totally extraneous to sexual pleasure – he knows sexuality only by hearsay and images – as well as to the rationale of power and of the polis (983-1045).[23]

[22] On the plot and the juxtaposition of the semantic fields of αἰδώς and ἐρως, see Beltrametti 2002.

[23] His father, Theseus, had accused him of having dishonoured his bed and wife, despite the fact that he had led people to believe that he was a superior man, in communion with the gods, honest, viceless, puritan; a vegetarian follower of Orpheus, exalted by the cult of his books (943-56).

However, unlike Medea's Nurse, who had coped with diversity from both the point of view of a stranger seeking shelter and the point of view of a welcoming and suspicious community, Phaedra's Nurse does not engage with the main theme, despite being a more present, complex and influential character within the plot.[24] She is rather captivated by the theme of forbidden love, attracted to desire and its metamorphoses.

"Old woman, faithful nurse of the queen", Γύναι γεραιά, βασιλίδος πιστὴ τροφέ, the Coryphaeus calls her (267), when she appears on stage besides Phaedra, carried out from the palace on the rotating trolley and in full prostration. This is the image provided by the Nurse in the dialogue with Phaedra just ended, a fast-paced and exhausting dialogue in anapaestic dimetres (176-266) in which she concentrates all words and gestures on the sick queen, in an attempt to satisfy all her needs and extort the secret of her disease from her apparently contradictory and meaningless broken phrases, from the constantly changing objects of her desire, from her slips. This Nurse does not know anything and does not predict anything, her language is not that of knowledge, let alone foresight, like that of Medea's nurse, but that of affections, care, nourishment, all-out defence of her queen. Taking on the main distinctive features of Eurycleia and Cilissa, the Nurse speaks the language of the good and confiding substitute mother. Her dialogues with Phaedra, no matter the tone and register, are filled with vocatives which appeal to the "daughter" (τέκνον, 203, 340, 350, 353, 517, 705), to the "beloved daughter" (παῖ, φίλη παῖ, 212, 218, 223, 288, 297, 316, 346, 521).[25] From the moment she arrives on stage and again when she is about to leave it after being sent away with insults and curses by Phaedra, the Nurse seems willing to bring the queen back to her childhood and innocence, to the trust and total submissiveness to her nurse. Only on two highly marked occasions the Nurse's address is directed to the Lady, δέσποινα: this occurs at the beginning of her first and only long speech (433-81), her answer to Phaedra's unexpected confession to the women of Troezen, in which she revealed her insane passion and her choice of death as the only solution to her failure (373-430). It occurs again in her penultimate utterance (695-701), delivered in the desperate attempt to restore trust with Phaedra by recalling the nourishment, the giving of herself and of her body through milk, the love of the 'good mother' which persists although it is no longer reciprocated.

On both occasions, the address to the Lady marks a shift in communi-

[24] The Nurse has 223 lines in total, more than Phaedra and more than Theseus, including also the lines in which off-stage she announces Phaedra's death by hanging (776-8, 780-1, 786-7) while the audience only hears her voice.

[25] The Nurse addresses Hippolytus by the same appellations and begs him not to reveal the secret she had just disclosed to him (παῖ, 603 and 611; τέκνον, 611 and 615).

cation. If in the final line there is the bitter awareness of an interrupted connection and the attempt to restore it, in the speech of the *remedia amoris* (433-81) the shift in tone and register marks the Nurse's willingness to take on a new role, an authority independent of familiarity. It is the transition from a familiar communication in which words comment on gestures and aching bodies to a rhetorical exercise of persuasion interwoven with conventional gnomic knowledge about the invincibility of amorous passion, Cypris or Eros, illustrated by "stories which are well known by those who own the writings of the ancient and who themselves are interested in poetry."[26] It is the proud surrender of the role and language of mother and her taking over the part of a rhetorician in order to discuss the magical solution of charms, filters and evil spells, which – as Phaedra claims – are rejected by common sense as shameful and hideous practices, αἰσχρά.[27]

From the moment the Nurse understands that the love and abnegation of those who take care of a sick person to the point of suffering even more than that person, in fact suffering twice (186-7, 257-8) is not enough to save Phaedra from her insane passion for Hippolytus, that not even the topic of the protection of the children from the alleged demands of Hippolytus, "the bastard, νόθος" (305-10), is enough, all ethical restraints are loosened and rhetoric takes on sophistic and unscrupulous tones. Even the search for perfection and strenuous resistance to passion, the Nurse explains, are forms of *hybris*, of arrogance and illusory omnipotence; solemn words are useless when Phaedra needs him, not to seek pleasure, but as an existential matter of life and death (467-76, 490-7). The Nurse, who had suggested to ask the help of physicians when Phaedra was in the grip of inertia, asthenia, aphasia and apathy, a sort of anticipation of death she used to control desire, now advocates in a modern way in favour of ancient knowledge and ancient practices which in post-plague Athens seemed not only regressive and archaic but also dangerous:[28] "We will need to get some token from the man you love, either a lock of hair or something from his garments, and join together one delight from two".[29]

[26] ὅσοι μὲν οὖν γραφάς τε τῶν παλαιτέρων / ἔχουσιν αὐτοί τ'εἰσὶν ἐν μούσαις ἀεὶ / ἴσασι . . . (*Hippolytus* 451-8)

[27] The motif of shame, αἰσχρά, αἰσχίστους λόγους, insistently recurs in the lines that follow the Nurse's argument, four times in lines 498-506.

[28] The themes of magical practices, their dangers and their legitimacy were especially important in the Athens of the post-plague years, after the failures of professional physicians. These themes are also addressed by Deianira in Sophocles' Trachiniae, a tragedy which can probably be dated to 426 BC, therefore very close to Euripides' Hippolytus: Deianira smears Hercules' tunic with the blood of Nessus and is immediately assailed by the fear she had dared too much (*Trachiniae* 663-4).

[29] Δεῖ δ'ἐξ ἐκείνου δή τι τοῦ ποθουμένου / σημεῖον, ἢ πλόκον τιν'ἢ πέπλων ἄπο, /

The Nurse does not limit herself to recommend the use of magic to defeat adversity, but also shows her knowledge of the main principles of magical thinking and practices, namely the sign-symbol standing for the subject, the part standing for the whole, the contagion by continuity and contiguity, making one out of two. Shifting from words to deeds, in a scene of extraordinary delicacy (565-731) following the Chorus's prayer to Eros, the Nurse, perceiving herself as Phaedra's shadow, approaches Hippolytus off-stage (565-600). A very harsh confrontation ensues, which Phaedra, standing by the door of the palace, hears and reports to the Chorus and the audience - who can only hear a vague noise – and then enacts on stage (601-68), where Hippolytus is replaced by Phaedra who, after a heart-wrenching lament over her own downfall, banishes her in the course of their final dialogue (669-731).

In the ultimate attempt to establish the fatal connection between Phaedra and Hippolytus, the magical arts on which the Nurse had relied fail to work (680-1) and lead to the downfall and expulsion of the character, who becomes the target of the invectives of Hippolytus, who – as Phaedra reports, calls her a procurer of obscenity and false wife (589-90) – and of Phaedra, who feels sullied by her revelations and, in an emotional climax, curses and banishes her.

Euripides appears to have deployed his full arsenal of dramatic strategies in order to draw the figure of the Nurse. Whereas the other characters of the tragedy – Hippolytus, the protagonist, Phaedra, the stepmother in love with him, and Theseus, Hippolytus' father and king of Athens – do not deviate from their constitutive traits in spite of nuances depending on their interlocutors and their actions' status, the character of the Nurse is continuously reshaped by situations and in her repeated attempts to change the state of things. In the first two episodes, the Nurse assimilates events and in turns generates new events, transforming herself, taking on different points of view, languages and registers:[30] at first, she is worried about Phaedra's health, then she becomes suspicious and curious, then she turns into a bold advisor guided by a strong sense of reality and imminent downfall and by the concern for the queen's children, then she is overwhelmed by the scandalous truth and the approaching catastrophe (353-61). Finally, immediately after Phaedra's speech, she is ready to overcome shame and supports the illicit love of her child and lady by any necessary means, including magical filters. Eventually, she supplicates Hippolytus, begging him to keep his oath of silence, and begs Phaedra, but to no avail.

Euripides counters the heroic steadiness of the *aristoi*, who never turn

λαβεῖν, συνάψαι τ' ἐκ δυοῖν μίαν χάριν (*Hippolytus* 513-15).

[30] The lines 291, 298, 433-435 precisely mark the Nurse's emotional and rational outbursts.

back and never renounce their honour and reputation, with a female figure of unknown origins who, by analogy with other nurse figures, can be interpreted as a disgraced woman. An old woman who amid difficulties learned the necessity of compromise and who sees rigour as a form of excess and presumption, as *hybris* – "It is said that exacting conduct in life brings about more falls than delight and is at war more with health. So I praise excessiveness less than 'nothing in excess'; and the wise will agree with me"[31] – an old woman willing to submit in order to protect the child she had breastfed. This Nurse provides an ode to life and the right to happiness, which costed her the exclusion from the sphere of those who matter and, above all, Phaedra's death.

6. "For him you are the daughter of an eminent man, a bride with a rich dowry":[32] Flattery

In Attican tragedy there are no other examples of Nurse figures endowed with the same intensity as Phaedra's Nurse. In the fourth episode of *Andromache*, the Nurse of Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus and sterile bride of Neoptolemus (Achilles' son), comes out of the palace and speaks about the princess, who is giving way to despair and threatens to kill herself, barely prevented from doing so by her slaves (802-19). Hermione offended and threatened to kill Andromache, her husband's Trojan concubine, and the child born of their union. Her father, Menelaus, came to visit her and is verbally assaulted by old Peleus because of the unfairness of the power he boasts about and because of his cowardly behaviour towards Helen and his aggressiveness against Andromache and her child. He left Phthia without granting any protection for his daughter and the princess is struck with terror. She fears her husband's return and the punishment which he will inflict on her for plotting the murder of the innocent.

The last nurse of Euripides' theatre does not have the same ability to analyse and understand conflict as Medea's Nurse, or rather her double. She does not show the same absolute loveliness in which Phaedra's Nurse annihilates herself to the point of justifying and supporting the queen's illicit passion. The main feature of this nurse is the helpful lie, or perhaps the servile hypocrisy which induces her at first to realistically explain to the

[31] βιότου δ' ἀτρεκεῖς ἐπιτηδεύσεις / φασὶ σφάλλειν πλέον ἢ τέρπειν / τῇ θ' ὑγιείᾳ μᾶλλον πολεμεῖν· / οὕτω τὸ λίαν ἧσσον ἐπαινῶ / τοῦ μηδὲν ἄγαν· / καὶ ξυμφήσουσι σοφοί μοι (*Hippolytus* 261-6). To the Nurse, Phaedra's pretence of self-control seems again to elude the rules of this world, 459-77.

[32] Nurse: οὐ γάρ τί σ' αἰχμάλωτον ἐκ Τροίας ἔχει, ἀλλ' ἀνδρὸς ἐσθλοῦ παῖδα σὺν πολλοῖς λαβὼν ἔδνοισι, πόλεώς τ' οὐ μέσως εὐδαίμονος (*Andromache* 872-3).

Chorus the condition of Hermione, guilty of unacceptable excesses against the innocent and the defenceless, and then to deny herself in the attempt to comfort the princess, who arrives on stage in a state of extreme agitation. In a duet with Hermione, the nurse lies about her hybris with some ambiguity and contradicts the information previously given to the Chorus: she says that her father will not abandon her and that her husband will not believe the cheap lies of his barbarous concubine because Hermione is not a war booty, but a bride with a rich dowry.

The continuous reconfiguration of the character to pursue the good through changes and twists which are the distinctive traits of Phaedra's Nurse, here becomes the compassionate and opportunistic dissimulation of someone who wants to prevent the princess from collapsing in order to avoid falling into the same abyss. The scene in which Hermione bares her breasts and the Nurse tries to pull her gown together to cover them recalls the motif of the veil incessantly requested and removed in the first scene between Phaedra and her Nurse in *Hippolytus*. However, this Nurse shows neither care nor tenderness. She only shows a resolute will to stop the princess from making a spectacle of herself and prevent news of her insanity from spreading outside the palace, thus exposing the family to public mockery.

Free from a predestined fate and from the prejudices that stem from names and family ties, the minor (but not humble) characters of Euripides' theatre provide evidence that society was changing, capturing the playwrights' attention. In these characters, poetry and politics blend and intertwine in more obvious ways than in the major characters of the great myths. The perspectives on mythological events and the historical themes that permeate them multiply points of view and continue to surprise.

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