

# **S K E N È**

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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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ROSY COLOMBO\*

## Foreword

The eleven essays collected in this issue, spanning from Homer (Nancy Felson) to Derek Walcott (Madeleine Scherer) through Attic tragedy (mainly Euripides: Anna Beltrametti, Ronald Blankenborg, and Francesco Puccio), Seneca (Ivan Spurio Venarucci and Puccio) and the Italian Renaissance drama (Matteo Bosisio and Annalisa Perrotta), Shakespeare and early modern English drama (Terri Bourus and Katarzyna Burzyńska), Racine's *Phèdre* (Delia Gambelli) and Marina Cvetaeva (Puccio) are unified by the presence of one important, easily overlooked go-between character: the figure of the nurse who bridges the gap of cultures and literary genres, especially epic narrative and the stage, as Blankenborg shows with regard to Euripides' *Medea*.

The meaning of the English noun "nurse" has changed over time as the social role it defined became obsolete. Originally a borrowing from the French "nourrice", the word signified the woman who provided nourishment and nurture to babies she had not given birth to. It is in this sense that it was most often used up to the nineteenth century, both denotatively and metaphorically. See, for instance, Shakespeare's Cleopatra, referring to the asp as the "baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.304-5). Specifically, the wet nurse, defined as "A woman who is hired to suckle and nurse another woman's child" (*OED*), was opposed to the dry nurse, "A woman who takes care of and attends to a child but does not suckle it" (*OED*). As the social role of the wet nurse disappeared, the term by extension came to refer broadly to "a person (historically usually a woman) who cares for the sick or infirm" (*OED*) and now is understood to define principally a professional role in medical care. The connection to nourishment has been lost. We decided to use the word "nurse" throughout this publication

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to preserve the etymological meaning of nurture and nourishment which it implies, as do the Greek *trophòs* and the Latin *nutrix*.

In Greek literature, from Homer to Euripides, the Nurse is a central figure of authority. As Karydas first pointed out (1998),<sup>1</sup> its roots may be traced in the models of female hierarchy in early choral lyric performances, and the poetics of female *paideia* as can be found in those performances were later appropriated and reshaped in epic and tragedy. Nancy Felson's article focuses on the archetype of Eurycleia, the paradigmatic nurse in the *Odyssey*, who, although a servant, is not devoid of authority. As Anna Beltrametti argues in this issue, not only does Eurycleia perform the famous recognition scene through Odysseus's scar in Book 19 which attracted the critical attention of Erich Auerbach in his survey of the origin of realism in Western literature, but her role also continues through the whole poem, and when she acts she has a crucial impact on the plot. Eurycleia epitomizes the distinguishing features that make the nurse a relevant figure in Homeric society, thus establishing an archetype for the nurses in Attic tragic drama. These nurses are different from one another, each being characterized by one predominant function and/or feature: substitute mother, guardian/educator, confidante, bestowed with rational or psychological insight, sometimes a simple witness, sometimes a sort of chorus, capable, as Tiresias, of *seeing* and foretelling. They are endowed with wisdom and intelligence, they feel a sense of belonging to the household they serve; their intimacy is grounded in the nourishment and care of the babies with whom they are in direct physical contact, and as the children grow up they assume a right to admonish, and can develop an unswerving loyalty. They are the embodiment of common sense while they have no difficulty in transgressing behavioural and linguistic codes. The prismatic quality of the *nutrix* may affect the dramaturgical structure of the play, for instance providing tragedies with a comic element tinged with a whole variety of inflections, from irony to malice, exposing unnecessary sentimentalism. If, on the one hand, the bond with the female heroines is grounded on sympathy and shared secrets, often verging on complicity, on the other hand, reason and duty allow the nurse to detect what is wrong in the behaviour of her child (*Romeo and Juliet*) or mistress (*Medea, Phèdre*). A telling example of such insight and understanding is Cilissa's, Orestes's nurse, who in Aeschylus's *Libation-Bearers*, as Beltrametti notices, is the first to spot and reveal to the women of the Chorus Clytemnestra's deceitful reaction to her son's return home.

Moreover, (not) naming the nurse is an issue: Homer's Eurycleia and

<sup>1</sup> Examining Nurse figures in ancient Greek epic and drama, Helen Pournara Karydas focuses on the verbal manifestations of the Nurse's authority-advice, approval, disapproval, directions and orders.

Aeschylus's Cilissa, together with Shakespeare's Angelica (commented upon by Terri Bourus) and Racine's Enone (analyzed by Delia Gambelli) are the only nurses to have a name, in line with being characters and not stereotypes, in contrast to a wider sequence of anonymous nurses.<sup>2</sup> The lack of a name is usually considered as evidence of lack of status. Our interpretation is generally different, proposing that on the contrary namelessness may be viewed as a constitutive trait of the nurse's complex, prismatic quality mentioned above, rooted in her physical bond with the child and care for it as the basis of the category of the maternal. As Bourus writes, mothers are notoriously rare in Shakespeare's plays, but maternal care is a dimension Shakespeare explored in a number of ways: in the Senecan tragic light of *Titus Andronicus*, in the linguistic unruliness of Juliet's nurse, and even with the challenge of its gender connotation in *The Tempest* in Prospero's maternal function grafted onto his paternal guidance during the upbringing of Miranda. Finally, and more compellingly, Cleopatra transcends a conventional maternal connotation in the performance of her own death: with the asp as a baby sucking the nurse asleep, darkly subverting the idea itself of nurturing – a maternal paradox.

Another facet of the prismatic quality of the nurse is the ethics of care which may be viewed from a postmodern perspective, as Katarzyna Burzyńska does in dealing with several early modern English plays, where she detects analogies between nurses and contemporary “dependency workers” in a system that provides them with a function, but not with power. The same politicization occurs, according to Madeleine Scherer, in Derek Walcott's version of a Eurycleia strongly tied to Egypt, within a context of references to Afrocentric literature and Caribbean rituals: a political adaptation to global culture and memory.

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<sup>2</sup> Another exception is Aeneas's nurse Caieta, whose name is ritually handed over to the location of her funeral in *Aeneid*, 7.1-4.

