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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

Romeo and Juliet

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Emanuel Stelzer

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S K E N È   Theatre and Drama Studies

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Juliet's Nurse and the Italian *Balia* in the *Novella* and the *Commedia dell'Arte* Traditions

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Abstract

Within the context of Shakespeare source studies, the present essay focuses on Juliet's Nurse and so far under-studied Mediterranean models provided by both the Italian *novella* tradition and the *commedia dell'arte*. Special attention will be paid to the Nurse's language, which has often been defined as exceptional within the Shakespearean canon. Her talkativeness has no equivalent in classical and early modern figures, but the *commedia dell'arte* tradition provides examples of similar female loquacity through the theatergram of the *balia* (wet nurse) as the *innamorata*'s confidant, who prates about earthy topics, such as maidenheads and marriages, joins slanging matches with male characters and is often reprimanded for her loose tongue. In this light, the theatergram of the *balia* is a conduit for a comparison between the Shakespearean Nurse and Italian stock characters.

KEYWORDS: William Shakespeare; *Romeo and Juliet*; source studies; *commedia dell'arte*; wet nurse

Shakespeare source studies have long discussed the main narrative sources of the English playwright, from Brooke's 1562 narrative poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* to Painter's 1567 prose version of the same story likewise based on Boaistuau's French translation of Bandello's *novella* (Muir 1977; Bullough 1966; Belsey 2015; Bigliazzi 2018). As de Sousa has pointed out, "[t]he pervasive presence of the Mediterranean" in Shakespeare consists both of "the array of Mediterranean texts that Shakespeare loved and consulted in writing plays" (2018, 138) and of the social, cultural, religious and economic differences between the countries of the Continent and England which allow the playwright to investigate "unstable borders", unknown spaces and imaginative blanks in his writing. My present aim is to shift the focus onto other so far under-studied Mediterranean models that may be related to the character

of Juliet's Nurse with special attention to her language in dramatic situations which see her as a confidant of her mistress and a go-between for the young lovers. To this end, I rely on Clubb's notion of "theatergrams", that is, "interchangeable structural units," such as "characters, situations, actions, speeches, thematic patterns" (2002, 35) typical of *commedia dell'arte* which were constantly modified by theatrical practices until they became "streamlined structures for svelte play-making and elements of high specific density, weighty with significance from previous incarnations" (6). The fluid nature of theatergrams, which are constantly subjected to a process of revision and appropriation, helps us to unveil how a "text carries a web of resonance that can hardly be contained by binary vectors" (Henke and Nicholson 2016, 13) and can highlight why the *commedia dell'arte* tradition with its inter- and transtextual quality proved a pan-European phenomenon.

In the Nurse's case, the "homely little theatergram of the *innamorata*'s abettor" (Clubb 1989, 12) identifies this character as a "balia, old fante, or mezzana" (nurse, old servant, or bawd) who "natter[s] earthily about maidenheads and marriages . . . invites reprimand [and] indulge[s] in slanging matches with insulting boys" who achieved an "unprecedented expressive scope" in the mid-sixteenth century Italian theatre (ibid.). This description underlines two main characteristics which are fundamental in the present study: the "abettor"'s fluidity between the roles of wet nurse and bawd, and her prating talkativeness. Both these characteristics are famously present in the Shakespearean Nurse and thus defined as "a highly original piece of writing" (Everett 1972, 130), "something altogether new both in this play and, in fact, in Shakespeare's output" (Brooke 1968, 92).

Given the Mediterranean focus of the present discussion and the influence of Italian *novellas* on Shakespeare's tragedy, these two characteristics will be tested against the Italian character of the *balia* (nurse) in both the *novella* and the *commedia dell'arte* traditions. As will be seen, a comparison between the language of Shakespeare's Nurse and that of the *balia* of the Italian *novella* tradition elicits echoes of other models rooted in the ancient tradition of the classical *nutrix* in Greek and Latin drama, as well as a particular kind of early modern English wet nurse close to the dramatic figure of the bawd, which were likely known by Shakespeare. However, neither

these models nor the *balia* of the Italian *novella* tradition display sufficient linguistic originality to be taken into account as figures in some way comparable to Shakespeare's Nurse, whose verbosity and linguistic "inconsequentiality" (Wells 2015, 308) can instead be spotted in another Italian tradition, that is, the *commedia dell'arte*, and more precisely in the language of the stock figure of the *balia*. As will be shown, the theatergram of the *balia* and its focus on her loquacity shows similarities with Shakespeare's wet nurse, which, if recognised by the Elizabethan audience, may have suggested the Nurse's bawdy talkativeness as a marker of Italianness.

1. Shakespeare, the Italian *Novella* and the "prating noorse"

The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is famous for her linguistic exuberance as well as metric complexity to the extent that it is dubious whether she speaks in verse or prose. As Nicholas Brooke noticed long ago, she is "something altogether new both in this play and, in fact, in Shakespeare's output" (1968, 92). Her uncommon prating attitude may derive from her characterisation as a bawd as underlined by Clubb (1989, 12). In Shakespeare's tragedy, Mercutio explicitly refers to Juliet's Nurse as a "bawd" when, in 2.4, she approaches him and Romeo to question the latter about his intention of marrying Juliet. She is greeted first by Romeo as "a sail" (98), usually considered as a reference to her clothing. Then Mercutio picks up the nautical joke started by Romeo and calls the Nurse "a bawd" (124) by playing on the homophonic similitude between 'bawd' and 'board'. The association between the Nurse and the profession of the bawd, traditionally characterised as a conduit of worldly knowledge, has led critics to consider Juliet's Nurse as incomparable to other nurse figures in sixteenth-century drama, which, as I will explain shortly, were generally rather evanescent, vocally restrained *dramatis personae*. On the other hand, Mario DiGangi discusses how the nurse could "function as a bawd" (2001, 165) and indicates as the prime example of this dual role the Nurse of *Romeo and Juliet*, followed by other characters in Italianate plays such as Puttana in Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633) (which was deeply influenced by Shakespeare's play). Two female bawds appear in Shakespeare's works: Mistress Overdone in *Measure for Measure* and Mistress

Quickly in both parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* (acquiring a more 'respectable' role in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*); however, neither is described as a wet nurse (DiGangi 2011, 165n12).

The conflation of bawd and nurse, however, was already present in George Gascoigne's *Supposes* (performed in 1566 but first printed in 1573),[1] where Balia is called a "baude" by the other characters due to her role as the lovers' go-between ("I called hir baude, and tolde hir that I knew well enoughe howe often she had brought Dulipo to Polynestas bed", 3.5, 217) and is eventually included with the actual bawd of the play in the wider category of those "olde women . . . either péeuishe, or pitifull: either easily enclined to euill, or quickly corrupted with bribes and rewards" (3.3, 214). The merging of these two roles, however, is no English innovation as it depends on the Italian source of Gascoigne's play, that is, Ariosto's *I Suppositi*, where Nutrice, the wet nurse, is called a "puttana vecchia" ("old whore", 3.3, 227) and a "ruffiana" ("bawd", 3.4, 230).[2] More specifically, as will be seen, the conflation of the roles of the wet nurse and the bawd as based on greed and wit recalls a dramatic practice of *commedia dell'arte*, in which the figure of the *balia* was often associated to that of the *ruffiana* (old gossip or bawd) (Preeshl 2017, 11; Dickey 1966, 73; Roberts 1998, 75).

The second main characteristic of Juliet's Nurse, which seems to stem from her bawdy attitude, consists in her unique talkativeness, which has been described as "a highly original piece of writing . . . perhaps Shakespeare's first greatly human verse speech, so supple in its rhythms that its original text – the Good Quarto – prints it as prose" (Everett 1972, 130). The originality of the Nurse's language is reinforced by the lack of similar characters with such an original verbosity in Shakespeare's direct and indirect sources of the Italian *novella* tradition. Unlike Da Porto's, Bandello's *novella* features the character of the nurse and introduces her in the ball scene.[3] Still, her

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1 All quotations are from Gascoigne 1907.

2 These references to *I Suppositi* are to Ariosto 2008.

3 "Giulietta, bramosa di saper chi fosse il giovine in preda di cui già sentiva esser tutta, chiamata una sua vecchia che nodrita l'aveva" (Bandello 2022, 47*v*; "Juliet, eager to know who the young man was to whom she had already fallen prey, called an old servant of hers who had been her nurse"). All quotations from *Novella* 1.9 (*La Sfortunata Morte Di Dui Infelicissimi Amanti, Che L'uno Di Veleno E L'altro Di Dolore Morirono, Con Vari Accidenti*) are from the

voice is seldom to be heard as it is mainly reported by the narrator.[4] Similarly, her errands as the lovers' witty go-between usually do not require her to speak. In arranging the lovers' meeting, the Nurse is asked by Giulietta not to talk to Romeo, but rather to deliver a letter to him ("la vecchia . . . condescese al voler di Giulietta, la quale tanto seppe dire che indusse quella a portar una lettera a Romeo", 49*r-v*; "the old woman . . . agreed to the will of Juliet, who managed to persuade the nurse to bring a letter to Romeo"). Later in the *novella*, the Nurse does not even receive Romeo's answer, since he immediately turns to his servant Pietro and asks him to find a rope to climb to Giulietta's bedchamber.[5] This pattern of the silent or mediated vocal presence of the Nurse is interrupted only on two occasions which show her trying to wake the drugged Giulietta ("[s]u su, che gli è tempo di levarsi", 57*r*; "come, come, it's time to get up") and announce the young woman's death to her mother ("[m]adonna, vostra figliuola è morta", 57*v*; "my lady, your daughter is dead"). However, in both these situations the Nurse's speech is extremely concise and mentioned only because functional to the unfolding of the plot.

The representation of Italian wet nurses as vocally restrained confidants seems to be a typical motif of contemporary *novellas* as it can also be found in Bandello's *Novella* 2.5 (*Fabio romano da Emilia per gelosia ammazzato . . .*, 1554), *Novella* 2.41 (*Uno di nascoso, piglia l'innamorata per moglie, e va a Baruti . . .*, 1554), Novella 4.7 (*Accorto avedimento di una fantesca a liberare la padrona e l'innamorato di quella da la morte*, 1554), *Novella* 4.25 (*Ciò che*

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modernised edition of Bandello 2022 (page numbers refer to the diplomatic edition). Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

4 For example, see the summary of the moment when Giulietta reveals to the Nurse that she has fallen in love: "Giulietta . . . tutta l'istoria del suo amore alla buona vecchia scoperse. E quantunque la vecchia assai la sgridasse e dissuadesse da cotal impresa . . ." (49*r*; "Juliet . . . revealed to the good old woman the whole story of her love. And though the old woman scolded and dissuaded her much from such an undertaking . . .").

5 "Aveva Romeo un suo fidatissimo servidore . . . A costui, . . . diede la cura di trovar la scala di corda e, messo ordine al tutto, all'ora determinata se n'andò" (49*v*; "Romeo had a most trusted servant . . . He relied on him to find a rope ladder and, after having put everything in order, he left at the appointed hour").

facesse una ricca, nobile e forte bella gentildonna rimasta vedova, 1573); in Anton Francesco Doni's *Novella* 82 (*Un accademico fiorentino narra la così detta 'Novella della gentildonna'. . . Marmi,* 2, 1552); in Giovanni Francesco Straparola's *Favola* 2.2 (*Filenio Sisterno , scolare, in Bologna vien da tre belle donne beffato . . .,* Le Piacevoli Notti, 1, 1550) and *Favola* 8.3 (*Anastasio Minuto ama una gentildonna ed ella non ama lui. . . ., Le Piacevoli Notti,* 2, 1554). In all these *novellas*, the *balia* (also called *fante* and *nutrice*) presents herself as a loyal and pragmatic servant: she shows affectionate closeness to her mistress especially when trying to uncover the reason for her sorrows; she proves to be a useful mediator between the lovers; and she witnesses the tragic climax of the story. However, her language is seldom heard since it is usually reported by the narrator. Also, unlike Juliet's Nurse, the *balie* in such *novellas* simply do not ramble since their words must be directly instrumental to the delivery of key news which help to unfold the plot, such as the arrival of her mistress's lover at her door or the nurse's agreement to the lovers' plan.[6] In Bandello's *Novella* 1.5, the nurse is even mute and deaf ("mutola e sorda", 2013, 268).

The conciseness and controlled speech of the *balia* of Italian *novellas* is evident in Bandello's characterisation of Juliet's nurse which was retained in its translations. In Boaistuau, the language of the "nourrice" remains that of the trustworthy confidant as reported by the narrator, as when she deals with the necessary arrangements for the lovers' secret marriage and their first night together. However, the "nourrice" reacquires her 'vocality' sooner than the Italian *balia* in Bandello, since in Boaistuau we hear her speak not only when she comforts her distressed lady after Roméo's banishment[7] – a passage which is shorter than in Shakespeare – but

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6 "Pertanto io sono di parere che al desiderio vostro si doni onesto compimento": *Novella* 2.41, Bandello 2013, 1255 ("I believe that your wish should be honourably fulfilled").

7 "Suffise-vous que Rhomeo est vif, et ses affaires sont en tel estât qu'avecques le temps il pourra estre rappellé de son exil, car il est grand seigneur, comme vous sçavez, bien apparenté, et bien voulu de tous" (Boaistuau 2022, 59*r*; "suffice it that Rhomeo is alive, and his affairs are in such a state that in time he may be recalled from his exile, for he is a great lord, as you know, well related, and well liked by all").

also when she tries to wake Juliette up from her apparent death.[8] And Painter follows Boaistuau very closely.

The characterisation of wet nurses as vocally moderate and pragmatic confidants seems to have been popular on the early modern England stage too. Although sharing the same description as bawdy nurses, Gascoigne's Balia does not own Shakespeare's Nurse's linguistic unruliness. Her role is limited to the first scenes of *Supposes*, where she mainly speaks with her mistress about the latter's secret relationship. Most importantly, her language shows significant differences from the Shakespearean Nurse's. While in *Romeo and Juliet* the Nurse often takes control of the conversation when speaking to Juliet, in *Supposes*, Balia is heard only in the first scenes of the play, where she mainly speaks with her mistress through rather short and not elaborate questions and answers. Besides lacking the rambling quality which characterises the Nurse's language in *Romeo and Juliet*, Balia never leads the conversation as the Shakespearean Nurse does; instead, she is the one often left to make sense of her mistress Polynesta's riddling sentences.[9]

The popularity of the vocally modest nurse in early modern *novellas* and plays is comparable to the *domina-serva* couple of ancient drama,[10] which in turn may have offered an example for that of the *innamorata-balia* of the *commedia dell'arte* (Clubb 1989,

8 "Madamoiselle, c'est trop dormi, le Comte Pâris vous viendra lever" (73*r*; "Madam, it's too much sleep, Count Pâris will come and get you up").

9 "BALIA Then I understande you not, how sayde you? / POLYNESTA Mary I say that I loue not Dulipo, nor any suche as he, and yet I neither have changed nor wil change my minde. / BALIA I can not tell, you love to lye with Dulipo very well: this geare is Greeke to me" (1.1, p. 190).

10 In Latin comedy, the wet nurse plays a marginal and often silent role which limits her presence to a couple of lines or mere references to her existence and she seldom plays the faithful confidant to her young mistress. In Plautus' *Poenulus* and Terence's *Eunuch* and *Heautontimorumenos*, for instance, the wet nurse is introduced only as a functional character in the 'recognition plot', while in Plautus' *Aulularia* and *Mercator* she is given no lines as she is only referred to by other characters. Only in Terence's *Adelphoe* does the nurse have a comforting role towards her mistress, i.e. a worried mother, although she shows no loquacity or verbal wit and her role is restricted to only one scene (3.1). For further discussion on the role of wet nurses in Latin comedy, see Dunsch 2013 and Dutsch 2008.

12). In Euripides' and Seneca's plays as well as in Ovid's poetry in particular,[11] the *nutrix* functions as the affectionate and experienced confidant of the young and troubled mistress without showing Juliet's Nurse's communicative unruliness. Here suffice it to recall that in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Medea* the Nurse either tries to find a solution to her mistress' troubles,[12] or attempts to make sense of the action by relying on adages.[13] These tragedies were known in early modern England through several Greek and Latin editions published on the Continent (for instance, George Buchanan's Latin translation of Euripides' *Medea*, 1544) and in English translation (John Studley's translations of Seneca's *Phaedra* and *Medea* were published in 1566 and 1567, respectively). However, all such nutrices do not show comparable garrulity.

11 Examples of classical nurses as pragmatic speakers can be found for instance in Ovid's works. Although not present in his account of Pyramus and Thisbe's tragedy (*Met.* 6), the archetype of *Romeo and Juliet*, the stock character of the nurse appears in the story of Canace in Book 11 of *Heroides* and in that of Myrrha in Book 10 of *Metamorphoses*. In both episodes, the nurse conventionally refers to her old age and familiar bond with her mistress ("and begged her by her cradle, by the feeds / of her first days", *Metamorphoses*, Ovid 2008, 395-6), which however do not lead her to launch in aimless digressions. On the contrary, the nurse's voice is seldom heard except to further the dramatic action by means of short and poignant lines ("Canace, you're in love", *Heroides*, Ovid 2017, 34; "[t]ell me . . . / and let me help you. My old age is not / inactive", *Metamorphoses*, Ovid 2008, 391-3).

12 As for example when the Nurse tries to dissuade Phaedra from killing herself: "τί σεμνομυθεῖς; οὐ λόγων εὐσχημόνων / δεῖ σ᾽, ἀλλὰ τἀνδρός. ὡς τάχος διιστέον, / τὸν εὐθὺν ἐξειπόντας ἀμφὶ σοῦ λόγον. / εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν σοι μὴ ᾽πὶ συμφοραῖς βίος / τοιᾶσδε, σώφρων δ᾽ οὖσ᾽ ἐτύγχανες γυνή, / οὐκ ἄν ποτ᾽ εὐνῆς οὕνεχ᾽ ἡδονῆς τε σῆς / προῆγον ἄν σε δεῦρο· νῦν δ᾽ ἀγὼν μέγας / σῶσαι βίον σόν, κοὐκ ἐπίφθονον τόδε" ("[t]his is high moralizing! What you need / is not fine words, but the man! . . . / For if there were not such danger to your life, / . . . I never would have led you on so far, / merely to please your fancy or your lust. / But now a great prize hangs on our endeavors, / and that's the saving of a life – yours, Phaedra! / There's none can blame us for our actions now": 490-9). All quotations are from Euripides 2013.

13 "δεινὰ τυράννων λήματα καί πως / ὀλίγ᾽ ἀρχόμενοι, πολλὰ κρατοῦντες / χαλεπῶς ὀργὰς μεταβάλλουσιν. / τὸ γὰρ εἰθίσθαι ζῆν ἐπ᾽ ἴσοισιν / κρεῖσσον" ("[r]ulers have dangerous natures: / subjected to little, controlling much, / they are not inclined to relent from their passions. / Better to live in the ways of fair-sharing": *Medea*, 119-22).

Within this long tradition of silent or vocally restrained nurses, Brooke's poem marks a change. The number of the Nurse's direct speeches is surprisingly high: we hear her speak with Romeo about the details of his planned wedding to Juliet,[14] as well as to Juliet about Romeus's intention of marrying her with a long tirade (674-90) that served as the basis of Shakespeare's treatment in 2.5 (22-77). As in Shakespeare, Brooke's Nurse seems to have a taste for useless digressions as she delays the delivery of the actual good news with unnecessary comments on Romeus's fine appearance ("The best y-shaped is he, and hath the fairest face / Of all this town, and there is none hath half so good a grace: / So gentle of his speech, / and of his counsel wise", 679-81) and pointless hesitations ("'[N]ay soft', quoth she, 'I fear you're hurt by sudden joy'", 685). While unbothered at first, Juliet shows some irritation at her nurse's incongruous speech, but their exchange is cut short by the Nurse's comforting words about Romeus's positive response.

While in Brooke's poem the exchange between Juliet and the Nurse, including the Nurse's digressions, her opinion on Romeo and advice about the fittest time to enjoy life's pleasures is conveyed in just ten lines (693-702), in Shakespeare's play the exchange occupies the whole 2.5. Here, the Nurse delights the audience with her chaotic energy as she prates about her old age before announcing to Juliet Romeo's long-awaited agreement to their marriage:

> JULIET Now, good sweet nurse – O Lord, why look'st thou sad?
> Though news be sad, yet tell them merrily;
> If good, thou shamest the music of sweet news
> By playing it to me with so sour a face.
> NURSE I am a-weary, give me leave awhile:
> Fie, how my bones ache! what a jaunt have I had!
> JULIET I would thou hadst my bones, and I thy news:
> Nay, come, I pray thee, speak; good, good nurse, speak.
> NURSE Jesu, what haste? can you not stay awhile?
> Do you not see that I am out of breath? (21-30)

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14 "'Now by my truth', quoth she, 'God's blessing have your heart, / For yet in all my life I have not heard of such a part'" (Brooke 2022, 635-6). All quotations from Brooke refer to this edition.

Juliet's irritated reply ("[t]he excuse that thou dost make in this delay / Is longer than the tale thou dost excuse. / Is thy news good, or bad?", 33-5) does not push the Nurse to give any precise account of Romeo's message. The comical exchange is driven by the Nurse's prating speeches which mingle mentions of Romeo ("[y]our love says, like an honest gentleman", 55) with everyday concerns ("have you dined at home?", 45), unexpected questions ("[w]here is your mother?", 57) and complaints about her aching limbs ("[l]ord, how my head aches! . . . My back o' t' other side – O, my back, my back!", 48-50). While Brooke's Nurse soon resolves to grant Juliet's request and faithfully reports Romeus's reply, Shakespeare's almost refuses to deliver the message ("[i]s this the poultice for my aching bones? / Henceforward do your messages yourself", 63-4). "Linguistic inconsequentiality" remains the Nurse's trademark in the second part of the play too, where the young lovers' dream switches to tragedy (Wells 2004, 53).

Unlike in its literary antecedents, in Shakespeare's tragedy the development of the Nurse's complex and central role can also be recognised by her deliverance of the tragic news of Romeo's banishment to the heart-broken Juliet (3.2.35-72). As in the comical 2.5, here the Nurse cannot tell the events straight and ends up giving Juliet clueless pieces of information which prevent her from immediately grasping the truth. In few lines, the Nurse first mourns the death of a well-beloved man whose identity she does not define ("[a]h weraday, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead!", 37). Then, she couples this vague reference with her knowledge of Romeo's active participation in the tragic event ("Romeo can, / Though heaven cannot", 40-1). Juliet's frustration at such a confusion ("[w]hat devil art thou that dost torment me thus? / . . . Hath Romeo slain himself?", 43-5) does not result in a prompt explanation by the Nurse, whose incongruous prating cannot be contained by such reasonable requests for clarity. Thus, the nurse's confused reply ("I saw the wound, I saw it with mine eyes", 52) misleads Juliet into believing Romeo had slayed himself. Only a few lines later would Juliet finally learn that the Nurse was mourning the death of Tybalt, not of Romeo ("[o] Tybalt, Tybalt, the best friend I had!", 61).

Whereas, as I have argued, no Italian *novella* provides any comparable model for such a rambling and talkative confidant, and

only Brooke's comes close to it, another Italian tradition abounds with figures sharing a number of traits with Shakespeare's nurse: *commedia dell'arte*. In particular, by loosening the Nurse's exclusive relationship with Juliet,[15] Shakespeare "sharpen[s] the impact of the messenger function by making the Nurse the bearer of all tidings prior to the lovers' tragic separation" (Stevens 1996, 198) in a manner similar to the contemporary comic figure of the Italian *balia*, the *innamorata*'s confidant who is close to both young lovers and often runs errands for them.

2. The Nurse, the *Serva* and the Comical *Lazzi*

In early modern England, curiosity about the Italian peninsula had already emerged during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Queen Mary I, and eventually culminated in the 1560s under Elizabeth I. During these years, early modern English readers and playgoers became acquainted not only with Italian drama by means of translations, editions, and adaptations,[16] but also with the stock characters and theatrical practices of the *commedia dell'arte*. Such peculiar dramatic performances were frequently reported by dignitaries, travellers and players returning from the Continent, such as Will Kemp, Thomas Pope and George Bryan (Grewar 2015, 308). In addition, there were performances of the *commedia* in England as early as the 1570s, when Italian acting companies, such as Drusiano Martinelli's *I Gelosi*, started to tour Europe and

15 While in Brooke the Nurse has a privileged access to her mistress as much as the Friar has to Romeo ("[T]he old man's words have filled with joy our Romeus' breast, / And eke the olde wife's talk hath set our Juliet's heart at rest", 1512, in Shakespeare it is the Nurse and not the Friar who entreats Romeo to stand up against the force of adversity (Stevens 1996, 199).

16 To mention only a few, Gascoigne's translation and adaptation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi* (1566), Wolfe's edition of Aretino's *Quattro comedie* (1588) – the first single-authored collection of vernacular plays to be printed in England – together with his printings of Machiavelli and Castiglione, and Munday's adaptation of Pasqualigo's *Il Fidele* (*Fidele and Fortunio, or, The Two Italian Gentlemen*, 1585) furthered the popularity of Italian dramatic literature.

eventually cross the English Channel.[17] The presence of Italian *commedianti* is particularly significant for the present discussion as it implies the staging of female leads who played in the comedies brought on the English stage. As Pamela Allen Brown notices,

> [a]lthough the personnel of troupes often fluctuate rapidly, Spanish documents of the following decade are pertinent to the identities of Martinelli's actresses, who are significant for being among the first and perhaps the first, women to feature in full-length plays on the English stage. These records are special licenses of 1587 allowing Drusiano, his wife Angelica Alberghini, his brother Tristano, their companions Angela Salomon and her (unnamed) husband, and "La Franceschina" to perform in Madrid (Falconieri 1957, 74-5). In doing so, they identify the women of "Los Confidentes Italianos" as the first actresses in full-length plays on the Spanish stage - and their troupe as including veterans of the English tour of 1578. (Allen Brown and Parolin 2005, 128)

Within this context of exchanges, let us compare Juliet's Nurse and the *balia* of the Italian *commedia.*

To begin with, in Italian scenarios the *balia* occupies a more central role than wet nurses in the English drama before *Romeo and Juliet.* This importance was probably due to the different duties carried out by Italian nurses in real life. While in England it was common practice to hire wet nurses only for the first three years of life of the foster-child, the Nurse's prolonged permanence at the Capulets' house would not seem unusual in contemporary Italian society, where "wet-nurses, especially among the upper classes, often remained very close to the children they nursed and the families they worked for, thus, becoming members of the larger *famiglia* or household" (Giannetti 2009, 49). As Florio's *World of Words* (1598) explains, in Italian, "allevatrice" comprised three distinct roles, namely those of "midwife", "nurse" and "foster-mother" (Florio 1598, B2*r*). Besides being a caregiver, the Italian nurse could be

17 The 1570s are a fundamental moment for the popularity of Italian *commedianti* in England: in 1576, Italian players collaborated with Ferrabosco for a play at court; in 1578, *I Gelosi* reached the English stage; in 1579, *A Masque of Amazons* was translated for Italian players; in 1577-78 and again in 1603, Italian troupes were known to be travelling in England (Marrapodi 2011, 282).

a teacher to her young mistress, as is the case with *Gl'Ingannati* (whether directly or indirectly, Shakespeare's main source for *Twelfth Night*), where the unexperienced Lelia is described as the "*allieva*", both "nursling", "foster-child" and "student", of her *balia* Clemenzia (Ruggiero and Giannetti 2003, 213). Also, as Clubb's definition suggests, the *balia* could play the bawd by helping her mistress and furthering risky love plots. The close relationship between the Nurse and Juliet seems to reflect the one between the *balia* and the *innamorata* even in their definitive breakup. As Juliet lies to her parents as well as her nurse in order to be reunited with Romeo, so the *innamorata* usually "leaves her household in pursuit of romantic love as a double rupture from a resistant father and an intimate Nurse, a rupture that it is not simply recalled verbally, but represented on stage as well" (Finzi-Contini Calabresi 2015, 130).

The nurse of the *commedia dell'arte*, however, is more often referred to as Franceschina than "balia". Although "[b]efore 1600, Franceschina, La Ruffiana and La Balia played the female servants" (Preeshl 2017, 42), Franceschina is considered the "oldest and most essential of the female servants" which plays the roles of the "confidant, balia, mezzana, innkeeper" (Clubb 1986, 28)".[18] She appears as the middle-aged *serva* in Flaminio Scala's stock characters of the *commedia*, which "evoke[s] his old friends the Andreini family and their stage names" (Clubb 2004, 37).[19] In *Giornata* 9 of Scala's *Favole Rapresentative* (1611), Franceschina, Isabella's nurse, "feigns death and leaves town, only to return disguised as a gentleman who 'marries' Isabella in order to fend off her marriage to the man her father had intended for her and to enable her to marry her true

18 In *commedia dell'arte*, there are two basic types of the serving women. Columbina is "young and gullible, flirtatious yet innocent". She serves the *prima innamorata* but is also characterised as the *seconda innamorata* since she usually is "[r]omantically paired with Arlecchino" and proves to be "crafty, coy, and smarter than her lover" (Goell 2015, 93). On the other hand, Franceschina is "the housekeeper with seniority" (ibid.)

19 Although still debated, the choice of "Angelica" as the Nurse's name (4.4.5) may recall not only stock characters with the same name in the *commedia*, but also specific Italian troupes, such as the best-known company led by Drusiano Martinelli and his wife Angelica Alberghini, who often played the female lead in their performances.

love, Orazio, upon his return" (Crohn Schmitt 2014, 50).

Like the Shakespearean Nurse, the stock character of the Franceschina participates in a comical duo with another low-status character: while in *I Gelosi* – Isabella Andreini's troupe – Franceschina was usually paired with Pedrolino, the *zanni* or clown, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse is often coupled with her attendant Peter, whose role seems to be conflated with the Clown's in Q1.[20] Also, as in Shakespeare's tragedy, Franceschina is sometimes referred to as a "bawd" (Goell 2015, 93) possibly because of her worldly experience. In an entertaining monologue of unknown origin, *The Melon Peel*, Franceschina is presented as an old woman who reasons with her audience about the ways of love:

> I know all too well where my mistress is headed: the precipice I toppled over when I lost my virginity. It was all on account of a melon peel! Oh when I think of it, I could die of shame. I can't recall it without streaking my cheeks with tears. Let me bring you up to speed ladies and gentlemen: As a young girl, beautiful, round, and soft as a turtle dove, a certain young Spaniard from my town fell in love with me . . . (Goell 2015, 93)

Besides such similarities, the "theatergram of the libertine *balia*" (Marrapodi 1998, 60) suggests that the Shakespearean Nurse may share with the older servant of the *commedia* "moves . . . long familiar in various combinations of the *balia* or *serva* in Italian comedy" (Clubb 1989, 23), such as her

20 In Wiles (2005), the comparison of Q1, Q2 and Folio suggests that in Q1 the role of Peter was most probably conflated with that of the Clown as played by Will Kempe (84-9). For further reading on this see Belsey 2014, 107-8.

Franceschina and Pedrolino appear as comical duo in one of the many scenarios reported by Flaminio Scala in his *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* (1611). Here, *Giornata 18* is devoted to a comical version of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy called *Li Tragici Successi*, which is believed to be "mediated through the Masuccio/Da Porto/Bandello conduit" (Chaffee and Crick 2015, 25). This interplay of common dramatic material seems to suggest how "novellas circulating in both written and oral form would have provided another important source for Commedia dell'Arte" (ibid.). In the comedy, the servant Franceschina loyally helps her mistress to marry the son of a rival family and eventually ends up marrying the *zanni* Pedrolino.

tantalizing . . . the impatient *innamorata* by dragging out the lover's
message, her ancient, earthy reminiscence of the pleasure of losing
a maidenhead, encouraging and contrasting with Juliet's high
passion, her practical, unprincipled and uncomprehending advice
to Juliet to commit adultery (that is, bigamy with Paris), her taking
Romeo's money and glossing it with silence. (Ibid.)

More importantly, the Shakespearean Nurse and the *balia* seem
to share a taste for skilful verbal improvisation, a well-known
performative asset of Italian *commedianti* which generally consisted
in *lazzi*, that is, a form of short routines by which "an action . . . begins
and ends in itself" (extradiegetic function), or which "help[ed] to
advance the action, to complete and take the action itself to an end"
(Ludovico Zorzi qtd in Costola and Crick 2022, n.n.). To actresses
in particular, improvisations usually consisted in rapid dialogues
which relied on their creativity, wit and verbal mastery and were
"tightly associated with the actress as the controlling player" (Allen
Brown 2022, 60).

This hypothesis seems supported by some typographic
peculiarities in the Nurse's first speeches which are printed from
the 1597 Q1 to the 1637 Quarto in a peculiar typeface which
distinguishes them from all other characters'. The use of italics as
the Nurse's typeface may derive from either a mistake or a habit
of the printer of the first portion of the play, John Danter (Finzi-
Contini Calabresi 2015, 125). The choice of italics for the Nurse's
speeches may be justified by the early modern practice of relying
on this typeface in "play manuscripts (and printed texts) to indicate
'removable' fragments like songs, letters, prologues, and epilogues;
perhaps they also indicated malleable or less solidly rooted parts"
and thus worked as "a playhouse system for indicating in a text
which arts were changeable and which were fixed" (Stern and
Karim-Cooper 2013, 102-3). Also, italics was frequently used in
early modern texts to mark foreign, often Latinate, speech, as is
the case of Elyot's translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, where
"the English translation appears in black letter, the Italian original
. . . in Italics, and the French translation in 'roman'" (Finzi-Contini
Calabresi 2015, 126). Thus, the use of italics in signalling the
Nurse's speeches may indicate "a scenario or routine movable or

detachable from the rest of the play" (Finzi-Contini Calabresi 2015, 126) comparable to the practices of *commedia dell'arte* and/or be interpreted as a marker of Italianness.

In this light, scholars such as Finzi-Contini Calabresi have compared the speeches of Shakespeare's Nurse with improvised set pieces from the *commedia* which are often indicated in scenario collections reflecting the dramatic practices of the *commedia* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This suggestion can be substantiated by looking at examples of *lazzi* bearing some analogies with the Nurse's speeches in *Romeo and Juliet*. Chaffee and Crick divide *lazzi* into twelve categories (2015, 169): acrobatic and mimic; comic violence/cruel behaviour; food; illogical; sexual/scatological; class-rebellion; stage/life duality; stage properties; stupidity/inappropriate behaviour; transformation; trickery; wordplay. Although not spoken by a *balia*, the 'illogical' "*lazzo* of 'Have You Eaten?'" shows similarities with the Nurse's rambling exchanges with Juliet in the comical use of apparently incoherent questions. This *lazzo* consists in "two characters com[ing] to a *zanni*, who is a doctor, to bring him to Capitano's daughter. The *zanni* character responds by asking them if they have eaten. They say, 'yes.' The *zanni* character repeats the question several times and they beat him" (Chaffee and Crick 2015, 171). Standard repetitions and the posing of such an unrelated question to the core topic of the exchange also characterise the dialogue between the Nurse and Juliet in 2.5, where the Nurse returns to the young lover to tell her Romeo's intention of marrying her. In spite of Juliet's anxious waiting, the Nurse lingers on useless details, among which stands out a peculiar question, "have you dined at home?":

> JULIET   . . . Let me be satisfied, is't good or bad?
> NURSE   Well, you have made a simple choice; you know
>   not how to choose a man. Romeo? No, not he. Though
>   his face be better than any man's, yet his leg excels all
>   men's; and for a hand and a foot and a body, though
>   they be not to be talked on, yet they are past compare.
>   He is not the flower of courtesy, but I'll warrant him
>   as gentle as a lamb. Go thy ways, wench, serve God.
>   What, *have you dined at home*?

JULIET No, no. But all this did I know before.
        What says he of our marriage, what of that? (2.5.37-47;
        emphasis mine)

Unlike the *commedia* scenario, in Shakespeare, the Nurse does not repeat the question regarding Juliet's dinner, but relies on unrelated questions ("[w]here is your mother?", 57) and frequent references to her physical discomforts due to her old age ("[f]ie, how my bones ache. What a jaunt have I had!", 26; "[d]o you not see that I am out of breath?", 30; "Lord, how my head aches! What a head have I! / It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces. / My back a' t' other side, ah, my back, my back!", 48-9).

Overall, the Nurse's delayed report may also be compared to another *lazzo*, "the *lazzo* of delay", which can be found in a dialogue in prose between the Venetian Magnifico and his servant Zani in *Dialogo de un Magnifico e Zani Bergamasco*, which "embodies the central master-servant confrontation, placed firmly in the Republic of Venice, which many scholars see as the core of *commedia dell'arte*" (Andrews 1993, 177). As Pamela Allen Brown notices, Juliet's comic function is like Pantalone's – her gestures and voice must change from hopeful anxiety to ill-disguised fury . . . all the while the Nurse, like Zani, must keep generating a cascade of self-centered digressions . . . to gauge both audience and partner the gain the desired effect of rising tension and laughter" (2022, 125). Once again, although not featuring the stock character of the nurse, this dialogue shows patterns of repetition and linguistic unruliness which can also be found in the Shakespearean exchange as the *zanni* comes back from a courtesan's house and keeps his master guessing what news he has in store by means of useless interpolations, wordplays and digressions:

MAGNIFICO Splendid! What did she say about me?
ZANI   She's so polite, so accommodating, so friendly.
MAGNIFICO Yes indeed, she's got all the graces. What did she say
           about me?
ZANI   She gave me an enormous hunk of her cheese.
MAGNIFICO Get to the point man, tell me what she thought of
           the sonnet,
           and what her answer was.

> ZANI   She gave me some fresh, white bread.
> MAGNIFICO   Do you want me to burst? (qtd in Andrews 1993, 180)

The similarity between these *commedia dell'arte* dramatic situations and the scenes in which Juliet's Nurse appears seems to be supported by other passages in the Shakespearean tragedy which may share some features with the *commedia.* The balcony scene, for instance, can be compared to those moments in many *commedia* scripts where actresses were called to perform at their windows or doorways. From there, like Juliet, they could "admit or repel visitors, trade messages and love tokens, deliver solo laments or soliloquies, sing or listen to serenades, throw down keys, and plan assignations" (Allen Brown 2022, 61). These moments also created some room for humour by having the female lead "pop her head out and back in to react to the absurdities of the Capitano, Pantalone or Harlequin" (61-2). Something similar happens during the balcony scene, where Juliet's love talks with Romeo are comically interrupted by the Nurse, who meddles and 'pops her voice out' with a most inconvenient timing.

In this light, the Nurse's rambling may be considered the linguistic outcome of a process of assimilation and appropriation of foreign dramatic practices which had evidently somewhat influenced the English stage and the Elizabethan imagination.

3. Conclusion

As we have seen, the theatergram of the "*innamorata*'s abettor" (Clubb 1989, 12), that is, the "libertine *balia*" (Marrapodi and Hoenselaars 1998, 60) involves her in actions which qualify her as a prating bawd in ways that make her somewhat comparable to the Shakespearean Nurse. The presence of such actions and exchanges suggests Juliet's Nurse's closer affinity to the *commedia* stock character than to the classical *nutrix* figure, who actively tries to help her mistress but lacks Shakespeare's Nurse's gusto for digression. Similarly, Shakespeare' Nurse's uncommon loquacity cannot be found in those English works which more or less directly influenced his writing. Both Gascoigne's *Supposes* (which inspired Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*) and Painter's *Romeo and Iulietta*

(a probable source) show nurses who act as loyal confidants and useful servants to their unexperienced mistresses but lack Juliet's Nurse's linguistic expressivity and "inconsequentiality". In *Supposes*, it is the young Polynesta who delays the unveiling of a secret truth and leads the conversation with her wet nurse who, unlike Juliet's, is often left clueless by her mistress' riddling sentences. In Painter, the nurse is left speechless in a more practical sense as she is turned into an actual silent character who does not talk to Romeo, but rather delivers a letter to him, to which she does not even get a reply. An exception to these vocally restrained models may be found in Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, which shows a garrulous and comical nurse whose speeches are occasionally characterised by useless digressions and tiresome repetitions.

And yet, Shakespeare's Nurse presents some aspects which invite reflection on the possibility of relations with the *commedia dell'arte* model with which the Elizabethan audience could be familiar, for example through travelling acting companies such as *I Gelosi* and contacts between the Italian stage and English actors. The notion of 'theatergram' thus highlights the transcultural nature of the Shakespearean Nurse as it shows similarities to the stock characters of the *balia* and *serva* and to more general performative practices such as the *lazzi*. Therefore, the Shakespearean Nurse's "inconsequentiality" does not stand for "a mind that is naturally lacking in intellectual control" or affected by "senility" (Wells 2015, 211). Instead, her italicised speeches possibly signal her special performative status, a performative moment in which the actor was given the chance to "create an appropriate physical realisation of all that the speech implies" by means of "gestures, movement, facial play and subtlety of intonation" (Wells 2004, 63), thus showing the importance of taking into account "contaminatio, patterned complication, and the variation of theatergrams" (Clubb 1989, 25) when studying Elizabethan drama.

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