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## **Affirming Life Through Death: Female Subjectivity in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri and Gabriele D'Annunzio**

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Why is tragedy such an enduring form of poetic expression? Perhaps it is the lingering possibility of catharsis or of redemption that draws playwrights back to this classical form. In his critical introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), philosopher Raymond Guess postulates that tragedy has a paradoxically life-engendering effect: "it requires great strength to produce and appreciate tragedy because it takes us so close to the basic horror of things, but if one can tolerate this, the result is an increase rather than a decrease in one's ability to live vividly and create further art."<sup>1</sup> Tragedy consoles us, seduces us to continue to live despite the ills of modern society. According to Nietzsche, building a new tragic culture based on the fusion of Apollonian order and Dionysian transgression is a means by which to systematically defend against the pessimism that accompanies a fractured modern existence. The unity inherent in this classic literary form is an essential mode of self-affirmation and reorientation in a modern world that lacks coherence and meaning. In fifth century B.C. Greece, Nietzsche saw a superior culture oriented toward art instead of science or the "formally codified morality" prevalent in the disjointed central Europe of the nineteenth century (Nietzsche, xiv).

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Considering, it seems that there must be a connection between the insistent reoccurrence of classicism in the Italian literary tradition and the efficacy of tragic drama as a genre that spectators watch “because they in some sense understand that in watching this ritual self-destruction they are gaining insight into the fundamental human condition... They recognize that Oedipus’ fate is *the human fate*, and in particular in some sense *their own fate*” (Nietzsche, xviii). While this is an inherently masochistic form of knowledge, it is clear that death is one of the unique instances in a tragedy in which an authentic self can be, and often is, fully realized.

In this paper, I will trace the tragic poetics of two Italian literary figures, Vittorio Alfieri and Gabriele D’Annunzio, in order to exemplify how tragic production and self-affirmation are highly correlated. This correlation is seen most prominently through the authors’ narrative use and appropriation of mythic structures and through representations of death. In eighteenth century Italy, tragic drama was considered an essential genre, and Alfieri its exemplary poet: “il genere tragico era il genere per eccellenza secondo la coscienza estetica e retorica del Settecento; e la creazione di un teatro tragico nazionale, la cui mancanza pareva essere una vergogna per la nostra letteratura.”<sup>2</sup> Almost a century and a half later, and greatly influenced by the work of Nietzsche, Gabriele D’Annunzio utilizes tragedy and mythology in order to comment on the need for a new literary culture that is able to transcend the artistically shallow confines of early twentieth century bourgeois society. Ultimately, for both Alfieri and D’Annunzio, the genre of drama in its tragic mode functions as a literary key for thematically similar yet temporally disparate ideological projects:

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aesthetic reform that reflects ethical and national commitment, and often manifests itself in the desire for the rebirth of a uniquely Italian theatre in order to better contextualize the quest for self-affirmation by author and by character. To this end, tragedy is not an isolated form of expression, but rather a synergistic aesthetic practice that draws on mythic and historical practice to create a complex textual and performative experience.

I will compare the female protagonists of Vittorio Alfieri's *Mirra* (1784-6) and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Fedra* (1909) as a method of exploring the means by which the two authors conceive of and subsequently re-envision tragic drama. Specifically, I will focus on the composition, symbolism and language of each protagonist's eventual death, as awareness of how each playwright structures death is fundamental to understanding his tragic poetics. Furthermore, by investigating the deaths of female protagonists, or tragic heroines, it becomes clear that death, both as an artistic and a physical act, is a necessary component of female subjectivity and agency. It is a unique moment in which the characterological self is realized.

Separated by 125 intellectually influential years, the distance between the texts of Vittorio Alfieri and Gabriele D'Annunzio represents a major shift in the conceptualization of tragic drama. Alfieri was born in Asti in 1749 and educated in France, yet rededicated himself to dramatic production in Italian and the "discovery" of a cohesive and poetic national language. In view of his linguistic endeavors, he is often considered one of the greatest tragedians of the Italian theatrical tradition. He

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departed from the prevailing traditions of Italian theatre in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and developed a new vision and practice based on Arcadian reform and close observation of classic Greek and Roman texts. An aristocrat with formal republican sympathies yet terrorized by effects of the French Revolution, Alfieri was a product of Enlightenment project ethical and aesthetic imperatives who nonetheless included a distinct tendency toward proto-romantic introspection in his works. His tragic characters share an overpowering subjectivity in which the discovery of self as individual coupled with the realization of tragic destiny prevails. Benedetto Croce is one of the first critics to comment on Alfieri's innovative search for the self, categorizing him as proto-romantic (Alfieri, LXIV). In his introduction to *Mirra*, critic Bruno Maier further elucidates this manifestation of Alfieri's individualism: "Il centro della personalità dell'Alfieri va ritrovato, si è detto, in un eroico pessimistico individualismo. Questo significa, per il nostro poeta, senso altero e profondo dell' "io", aspirazione ad affermare decisamente se stesso e, quindi, lotta contro il mondo esterno, contro il "limite" costituito dalla medesima realtà, contro ogni oppressione che si opponga alla necessaria libertà dell'uomo" (Alfieri, XX). For Alfieri, catharsis not only propagates his opinions on civil and political redemption, but also his conviction in the search for identity. Alfieri's tragic model is based on intensely passionate speeches, few characters, and protagonists who are isolated by their greatness or unique situation. In the case of *Mirra*, it is the protagonist's ultimate suicide that engenders a catharsis of authenticity and thus of self-identification.

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Gabriele D'Annunzio was born in Pescara in 1863, and is often described in polarizing terms such as “decadent” or “fascist.” He was greatly influenced by Nietzsche, who wrote his critical text, *The Birth of Tragedy*, just seven years before D'Annunzio began his earliest poetic production *Primo vere*. The German philological text had a marked poetic and philosophical influence on D'Annunzio and significantly shaped the production of his tragic oeuvre. In 1897, D'Annunzio writes the perspicaciously entitled article “La rinascenza della tragedia,”<sup>3</sup> in which he reiterates that drama is the only form through which poets can effectively communicate to a crowd the “virile and heroic dreams which suddenly transfigure life.”<sup>4</sup> For D'Annunzio, these “virile and heroic dreams” take the form of Dionysian ritual and religious spirit, “which the modern dramatic poet must recapture” in order to produce meaningful theatre. Specifically in the case of *Fedra*, D'Annunzio creates a strong, nationalist, mythic reworking that invigorates the Italian stage and its tragic culture through a category-defying protagonist who functions as a mother, lover, warrior and patriot. Despite these vast temporal and thematic differences between Alfieri and D'Annunzio, a key singularity remains: the death of the female heroine is an essential tragic mechanism for both poets and functions as her unique method of reclaiming authenticity, subjectivity (or perhaps both) in an often-fated literary experience.

For Mirra, death is a catharsis, the only release from her worldly suffering. Death is also a singular form of self-realization, for as long as she lives, she must

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deny herself and her incestuous desires. For Mirra, however, truth-hiding is only a corrupted form of self-preservation: it maintains the body but not the soul, as is exemplified by her constant physical ailments and inability to speak. Until she is released (through death), she will literally be consumed by a passion that takes the form of an incurable disease. The mechanism of Alfieri's tragedy lies precisely in this paradox—it is only through consistent rhetorical dissimulation that Mirra is able to temporarily prolong her life. Thus, as a living being, Mirra is never able to realize an authentic self. Ultimately, her death is the victory of a poisonous passion assigned by a vengeful goddess over a “guiltless” soul. This reading of Mirra's death sheds light on Alfieri's pessimism and individualism, key aspects of his proto-romantic poetics: “La tragedia alfieriana, si è notato, si conclude con la morte, perché così imponeva il genere tragico e, soprattutto, perché a tale soluzione doveva condurre il drammatico pessimismo del poeta” (Alfieri, IL).

Following his conviction in the primacy of the individual and tendency toward pessimism, a pervasive characteristic of Alfieri's dramatic production is the narrative importance placed on limits—limits of empathy, of family, and most importantly, of oath taking and rhetoric. His poetic preoccupation with limits is seen in the anti-tyrannical philosophy established in his many political treatises, but more importantly for the purposes of this essay, in the psychological composition of his characters, most specifically his tragic heroine. Mirra, as a daughter, as an almost-wife, and as an individual, is tested and ultimately defeated by the limits of decency, of tradition and of mythic force. These limits not only reflect the intricate composition of Alfieri's

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character, but also the formal and thematic boundaries between enlightenment rationality and romantic sentimentality. Despite having been described as a traditionalist whose verse is “as hard as granite,” Alfieri’s capolavoro *Mirra* elucidates his tendency toward introspection on the part of his characters, and the confines of their search for subjectivity: “Il modello alfieriano (tragico ed etico insieme) pare entrare direttamente all’interno dell’azione politica e del complesso morale che in essa si innerva, ispirando le menti e segnando il cammino con l’esempio dei suoi personaggi eroici.”<sup>5</sup>

*Mirra* is structured as a re-working of Ovid’s story from book X of the *Metamorphoses* in which modern poetics are used to investigate and expose the psychological drives of the characters: “Alfieri approaches the Greek myths, with their grim picture of the cruelty and mysterious justice of the Fate, with the intention of exploring the elemental drives of the characters in ways that will be comprehensible to his contemporaries. One could even say he searches in their unconscious, rather than in the workings of Fate, for the origins of their neuroses, which he portrays by means of obsessive images and metaphors.”<sup>6</sup> Alfieri’s poetic innovation and break with strict eighteenth century neoclassicist tendencies is seen in his narrative disregard of the supreme power of Fate. To this end, Alfieri’s tragedy should be read in a proto-Freudian light that attempts to elucidate the subconscious tendencies that result in the tragic mechanism of the play. Considering this focus, I will discuss two fundamental aspects of Alfieri’s text: first, the pathologically recurrent act of rhetorical dissimulation on the part of the tragic heroine, and second,

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her conviction in death as the unique solution to her suffering.

It is clear that Mirra lacks a properly functioning faculty of speech from the beginning of the play. She is both unable or unwilling to speak, for fear that it will lead to the revelation of her impure and morally transgressive love of her father. While her reverse female oedipal complex has mythic origins (vendetta by Aphrodite against Mirra's mother), Alfieri defies adhering to a singular classic model both structurally and thematically. His division of the play into five acts is decidedly more Senecan in nature than Aristotelian, and his creation of *verso tragico*, a poetic style different from the verse of the lyric or epic, that uses *endecasillabi sciolti* to achieve an energetic and noble spoken language, differentiates his poetics from previous Italian tragedians (Carsaniga, 388). His newly developed and adopted tragic verse is particularly propitious to his innovative focus on psychological complexities: "Alfieri, certamente grande scopritore di "ferite" con l'arma della poesia, si sia avvicinato, più o meno consapevolmente, nel comporre *Mirra*, a uno dei nodi fondamentali della psicologia umana: quello cioè della pluralità del soggetto o della scomposizione della personalità."<sup>7</sup> Considering Alfieri's poetics, it is fitting that the conflictual father-daughter relationship that functions as the foundation of *Mirra* be revealed through rhetorical devices and complexities.

Mirra's inability to speak is constructed as pathological, and as such is the physiological manifestation of her psychological movement between sanity and folly, often represented by either tears or insomnia. Alfieri incorporates this sickness into the formal structure of his play through her consistent attempts to hide the truth: "in

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*Mirra*, il tema della perplessità e il tema della verità celata (da far scoprire al lettore-spettatore da se stesso poco a poco) avrebbero trovato il giusto, ineguagliabile punto di fusione stilistica” (Rando, 249). The plot develops over five key steps that each contribute to the tragic level of misinformation: four in which *Mirra* hides the truth, the fifth in which she succumbs to her illicit passion. The symmetrical inclusion of one instance in each act reflects formal tendencies in Alfieri’s poetics. *Mirra*’s reliance on rhetorical dissimulation as a means by which to negate her feelings begins in the first scene of Act I in which Euriclea the nurse recounts the previous tumultuous night to Ceri, *Mirra*’s mother:

EURICLEA

—I suoi sospiri eran da prima  
sepolti quasi; eran pochi; eran rotti:  
poi (non udendomi ella) in sì feroce  
piena crescean, che al fin, contro sua voglia.  
in pianto dirottissimo, in singhiozzi  
si cangiavano, ed anco in alte strida.  
Fra il lagrimar, fuor del suo labro usciva  
una parola sola: “Morte... morte;”  
e in tronchi accenti spesso la ripete (11).

Alfieri uses rhetoric of sickness to describe *Mirra*’s *cuore infuocato*. She is writhing in bed, incapable of sleeping or calming down, able only to call for death. In this passage, it is her sickness, not her own will or determination, that keeps her from revealing the truth. Subsequently, however, she actively attempts to conceal her passion and thus sheds her initial passivity. In the second scene of Act II, *Mirra* tries to deceive herself and her fiancé Pereo by inventing a false motive for her malaise. When Pereo rightfully assumes that *Mirra* does not love him, she responds with a

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fictitious explanation for her lack of enthusiasm:

PEREO

—Ma, tu immobile taci?...

Disdegno e morte il tuo silenzio spira...

Chiara e risposta il tuo tacer: mi abborri;  
e dir non l'osi...

MIRRA

Cagion poss'i

assegnar di un dolor, che in me supposto  
e in gran parte? e che pur, se in parte e vero,  
origin forse altra non ha, che il nuovo  
stato a cui mi avvicino; e il dover tormi  
dai genitori amati. (25-27)

This false pretense of not wanting to leave her beloved parents is continued in Act III.

Considering the unbearable pain of being married to someone besides her father,

Mirra decides that upon her wedding, she must flee. She presents this misinformation

to her parents as a way to reassure them that her extreme pain has been caused simply

by the thought of leaving them behind:

MIRRA

Addolorarvi ancora

io deggio. Udite. — Al travagliato petto,

e alla turbata egra mia mente oppressa,

alto rimedio or fia, di nuovi oggetti

la vista; e in ciò il più tosto, il miglior fia.

L'abbandonarvi (oh ciel!) quanto a me costi,

dir nol posso; il diranno le mie lagrime,

quand'io darovvi il terribile addio:

CERI

Tu di lasciarci

parli? e il vuoi tosto; e in un lo temi e il brami?

Ma qual fia mai? ... (44)

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Mirra's silence, incoherent rambling, and obscure allusions all indicate her determination to hide the truth. Act III is perhaps the crux of Mirra's verbal ambiguity insofar as she refuses to address her father as such, opting instead to call him *signor* (it is not until V.2 that she will speak his name). In a nod to mythical superstition, she believes that even uttering his name will lead to an admittance of her incestuous love:

CINIRO  
Tu mal cominci: a te non sono  
signor; padre son io: puoi chiamarmi  
con altro nome, o figlia? (39)

In an admonishment of her formality, Ciniro calls Mirra by the one appellation that hurts most dearly: *figlia*. The tragic resonance of this title and the relationship it indicates rings loudest in the fourth act, in which Mirra collapses in grief in front of her mother:

MIRRA  
dammi tu, madre, un ferro; ah! si; se l'ombra  
pur ti riman per me d'amore , un ferro.  
senza indugiar, dammi tu stessa...  
... Ahi madre! ... Ingrata, iniqua,  
figlia indegna son io, che amor non metro.  
Al mio destino orribile me lascia;... (66)

Mirra's consistent rhetorical dissimulation may prolong her life, but it is a solitary, unauthentic existence in which she cannot fully realize her passion, and thus herself. These examples show how her tragic ending is engendered by means of truth-hiding and sickness, the very tactics she employs in order stay alive: "Mirra riesce a ingannare la nutrice, i genitori, e il promesso sposo, fino all'atto quarto, per

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soccombere definitivamente nell'atto quinto" (Rando, 260). Unwilling to admit the true cause of her sadness, Mirra calls for death as the sole solution. Paradoxically, however, it is only in her *destino orribile* that she can admit her true nature and live authentically.

A key facet of Mirra's tragedy lies in her solitude. Without the capacity of speech, she is by default an isolated creature, incapable of effectively communicating with her parents, and able only to ruminate on, not to relieve, her suffering. The all-consuming nature of solitude reaches its climax in her death. Alfieri builds dramatic tension throughout the duration of the play by visually, metaphorically, and concretely invoking death. Not only does Mirra often call out for death ("morir mi sento") but her nurse and her mother frequently echo this sentiment when describing Mirra's situation: "Mirra più presso a morte assai, che a vita" (Alfieri, 64). The prevalence of these declarations results in an eerie verbal event that foreshadows the protagonist's suicide. Furthermore, her suicide can be read as the tragic consequence of the failure to communicate. This breakdown in communication, however, is not only narrative but also performative in nature. Neither her words nor her gestures or body language prove successful in defying Alfieri's mythic construct and thus preventing her demise. While the reoccurrence of macabre discourse could simply indicate the inevitability of death, this narrative and visual emphasis on communication coupled with symbolic resonance also renders it meaningful vis à vis the subjectivity of the tragic heroine.

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In Alfieri's dramatic oeuvre, death is a common form of self-expression and revelation. Thus, Mirra's decision to commit suicide is a unique moment in which she exposes the elemental force that has driven her action over the course of the play: incestuous love of her father. A symbolic reading of her death, focusing on the implement of choice, clarifies the extent to which her death is both passion-filled and identity-confirming. Specifically, after failing to control her obsession, she demands the sword of her father in order to kill herself. By stabbing herself with the consummate symbol of male (and in this case, also paternal) virility, she affirms her identity by acknowledging her morally transgressive feelings. In this act of death Mirra asserts her characterological agency through both her choice to die and her choice of weapon. It is interesting to note that during the last scene of the play in which she commits suicide, the only other character present is Euriclea the nurse. The conspicuous absence of her parents, who otherwise have a strong verbal presence throughout the play, helps maintain the focus on the tragic heroine's decision to end her life:

MIRRA:  
Quando'io... te... chiesi,....  
darmi... allora, .... Euriclèa, dovevi il ferro....  
io moriva.... innocente;... empia... ora... muoio... (82).

Where before she could not vocally admit her passion, in death she can symbolically assert the cause of her fatal malaise and thus reclaim a certain level authenticity:

Mirra, uccidendosi, si libera da una disumana, insopportabile condizione di vita, si salva dal peccato e conserva la sua innocenza interiore (ed etica). ... il suo suicidio è al tempo stesso, una vittoria e una sconfitta, una liberazione (e una catarsi), e un'inevitabile ammissione di colpevolezza (Alfieri, LXXIV).

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It is questionable if Mirra is guilty of some moral crime: clearly, she is the bearer of and consumed by a horrendous curse, yet Alfieri writes that she is “più infelice che colpevole.” Ultimately, however, Alfieri’s persistent pessimism would lead us to believe that the definitive tragedy lies not in the possibility or even probability of guilt, but rather in the fact of an inescapable mythic construct. He asserts that Mirra is caught in a drama far greater than herself, yet his keen and anxious exploration of the ego and of psychological dimensions demonstrates a proto-romantic sensibility that allows for a self-actualizing catharsis on the part of the tragic heroine.

One century after the self-inflicted death of Alfieri’s Mirra, Nietzsche writes that Greek tragedy also met its end in suicide.<sup>8</sup> This suicide, or the end of the grand age of Attic Greek tragedy, is conceptualized by the fall of Dionysus to Apollo. Nietzsche laments that with this fall, poetry too, dies: “when Greek tragedy died, there arose a vast emptiness which was felt deeply everywhere... ‘Tragedy is dead! And with it we have lost poetry itself!’” (Nietzsche, 54-55). It will take the fusion of Apollonian order and Dionysian entropy, or new mythology, in order for tragedy to be subsequently reborn. This poetic project based on mythic renovation was not new to D’Annunzio at the time he wrote *Fedra* in 1909. His regard for Nietzsche and his interest in a new tragic poetics had been developing since he was introduced to the German philosopher’s work. In his critical introduction to *Fedra*, Pietro Gibellini discusses this philosophical influence: “L’approdo al mito tragico ellenico, operato

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con taglio decisamente moderno e tutt'altro che neoclassico, e preparato da tempo e cioè dal 1892-1893, quando D'Annunzio, attraverso mediazioni e sintesi francesi, scopre il pensiero di Nietzsche.”<sup>9</sup>

In particular, D'Annunzio finds the connections that Nietzsche draws between myth, poetry, and the continuity of tragedy compelling, and embarks on a theatrical journey to engender a poetics able to withstand the pervasive bourgeois tendencies of the early twentieth century, and thus forge a theatre based on Dionysian energy. For D'Annunzio, myth is an essential component of his tragic poetics: in *Fedra*, he attempts to satisfy the mythic hunger of the modern man that Nietzsche discusses in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Now mythless man stands there, surrounded by every past there has ever been, eternally hungry, scraping and digging in a search for roots, even if he has to dig for them in the most distant antiquities. The enormous historical need of dissatisfied modern culture, the accumulation of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of a mythical home, a mythical maternal womb? (Nietzsche, 109).

The satiation of mythic hunger is an essential precondition to creating poetry: it is not coincidental that Nietzsche links these two concepts. Furthermore, this passage is rife with corporeal and natural imagery that takes on a reflective quality: the mythless person must feed him or herself, but the roots for which he or she digs both nourish and connect. Until mythless person can feed (and thus also create roots), he or she will not be able to create poetry. In *Fedra*, D'Annunzio takes seriously the search for a mythical womb, or locus of authentic rebirth. Through reinvigorating Dionysian energy, D'Annunzio searches for a substance that will satiate a culture in need of

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repair, a culture which Nietzsche claims “cannot be satisfied by anything it devours” and turns all nourishing food into “history and criticism” (Nietzsche, 109). Through new myth, it is possible to escape the redundant and pedantic realm of “criticism,” and thus create a world of poetry. A new Phaedra, different from and superior to the works of Euripides, Seneca, and Racine, that represents the strengths of a newly unified Italy, will serve as D’Annunzio’s literary remedy to the modern poetic ailment of alienation.

In order to circumvent the inescapable, deterministic, and ultimately fatal mythic construct within which Alfieri binds Mirra, D’Annunzio aestheticizes, eroticizes and even nationalizes the Phaedra myth, thus recreating a legend and a protagonist with promethean force. *Fedra* is a multifaceted text, its thematic emphases moving between rebirth of mythology as remedy to cultural and political imperialism for the sake of a new Italy. Each of these literary goals is engendered through rhetoric and imagery of possession, emphasizing further the role of the author as poet-creator. D’Annunzio explains his treatment of the Phaedra myth in a letter dated December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1908 and addressed to his muse of the moment, Nathalie de Goloubeff, to whom he also dedicates the play: “I jumped on my prey with the speed of great predatory birds. Truly, I *possessed* Fedra in the shade of the myrtle tree pierced by her gold pin. After Euripides, after Seneca, after Racine, I dare to produce a new Phaedra. You have given me the power to fertilize the worn-out womb.”<sup>10</sup> In this letter, D’Annunzio’s applies Nietzsche’s metaphor of the womb as the locus of rebirth. The violent, sexually charged rhetoric combined with the symbolic resonance

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of Phaedra's gold pin results in the propagation and renovation of the myth. The old versions of Seneca and Racine are stagnant and infertile, in need of a virile poet-creator. The most important line of the letter is the last in which D'Annunzio sets up a paradoxical circle of possession: only through fertilization, or his own authorial prowess, is the womb able to produce myth once more. However, the impetus for this action is bestowed upon him by a multidimensional leading lady, a combination of his mistress de Goloubeff, his protagonist Fedra, and his new poetic Phaedra. Commenting on this transfer of power and language of possession, critic Mary Anne Frese Witt posits that "the beloved-as-muse appears here as the bestower of power in the accomplishment of a kind of literary rape" (Witt, 51).

The rebirth of myth and of literature that D'Annunzio describes in his letter to de Goloubeff can also be read as an allegory of state: just as the author-creator takes possession of Fedra (his protagonist) and of Phaedra (the myth) by rewriting her story, he also takes possession of a nation in need of a valiant and heroic leader to establish a strong literary tradition that reflects national glory. The introductory dedication to his mistress is telling insofar as it exemplifies nationalist undertones deeply coded in the text: "A Thalassia/or chi domò col fuoco Il fuoco? Or chi/spense la face con la face? Or chi/con l'arco ferì l'arco?" (D'Annunzio, 1). The significance of de Goloubeff's moniker Thalassia is explained in an interview with Renato Simoni of the *Corriere della sera* (1909) in which D'Annunzio admits a secondary interest in the Phaedra myth, that of Minos, Phaedra's father:

Le scoperte degli scavi di Creta mi volse lo spirito a considerare non la

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tragedia di Fedra, ma quella di Pasifae, “nata dal Sole e dall’Oceanina,” la tragedia della creatura solare fatta preda schiumosa d’Afrodite nefanda, la tragedia del Labirinto, la tragedia di Dedalo e d’Icaro e di quel Minos figlio di Licaste che fu il primo dominatore del Mediterraneo, il primo Talassocrati, il remotissimo fondatore dell’imperialismo marittimo, re del più vasto regno insulare, padrone di una vera armata navale (D’Annunzio, XII).

By referring to his mistress as Thalassia in the dedication, D’Annunzio directly ties her status as muse, and thus her ability to inspire, to a strong, naval imperial past. He also underscores the importance of mythic legacy in engendering a strong tragic heroine by creating a genealogical system in which Minos’ military prowess is lauded, and Pasiphae, Fedra’s mother and Minos’ wife, is described in earthly, primal terms: “cosicché la mia Fedra è veramente una Pasifaeia, come per ispregio la chiama Ippolito, e indissolubilmente avvinta dal sangue e dal fato della madre miseranda” (D’Annunzio, XII). To this end, D’Annunzio creates an ancient, Cretan Phaedra “modeled on her mother, Pasiphae, a chaotic ‘Dionysian’ natural force” (Witt, 50). D’Annunzio’s cycle of possession is both intra and extra-textual: just as Fedra derives her mythic power from her mother’s oceanic and solar pedigree, so too does de Goloubeff rely on an eroticized imperial past to maintain her status as muse. Through both these literary allusions and his own relevant biographical experiences in the classic world,<sup>11</sup>D’Annunzio irrevocably links the creation of his new tragedy and tragic heroine to restored Mediterranean imperial glory. According to Witt, D’Annunzio’s “refuge in myth and poetry suggests not only a revolt against bourgeois drama in the attempt to ‘re-fertilize the womb of ancient tragedy’ but concurrently a flight from liberal-parliamentary ‘Italietta’ into the emerging

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metahistorical vision of heroic-imperialist Italy” (Witt, 51).

This genealogical reading of both the Phaedra myth and of D’Annunzio’s reincarnation of *Fedra* is essential in understanding its status as a comprehensively modern tragedy, capable of satiating modern man’s mythic hunger. It helps track D’Annunzio’s textual innovations, both thematic and metaphorical. One way he chooses to transport Phaedra from antiquity to modernity is through the inclusion of new characters that better represent both the role of author and creator as well as shadow the dark pathologies of the protagonist. These two new characters are Eurito, the messenger-turned-bard who has been said to represent D’Annunzio himself,<sup>12</sup> and Ipponoe, the Theban slave brought from war for Ippolito<sup>13</sup> who eventually falls prey to Fedra’s caprice and strength. Eurito’s inclusion recalls D’Annunzio’s 1897 article “La rinascita della tragedia,” and its emphasis on authorship as a means by which to fulfill the “heroic and virile” dreams of an age: “The soul of the tragedy as envisioned by the poet, however, lies neither in dramatic dialogue, nor in the interchange between hero and chorus, nor in any form of dialogical relationship between actors and audience... The starring, indeed the only real role in the dramatic-religious ceremony of modern tragedy will be that of the author” (Witt, 38). Not only does Eurito create verse, but he also uses it to engender great horror by reporting the gruesome death of Ippolito to Theseus in Act III. This type of horror, reminiscent of the messenger’s speech in Seneca’s *Phaedra*, is essential in fostering a classic cathartic ending. Through Eurito, D’Annunzio asserts the importance of his own role as poet-creator in the propagation of an enduring and innovative tragic experience.

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Including the character of Ipponoe serves two main purposes: to highlight Fedra's extreme jealousy and passion, and to elucidate her elemental strength. In a divinely inspired rage, Fedra decides to sacrifice Ipponoe to the goddess Hecate at the end of the first act. Specifically, Fedra demonstrates her unstable, Dionysian ethos through the pursuit and eventual betrayal of the slave. During their circular conversation, Fedra at first seems willing to help the young virgin:

FEDRA  
Non la schiava sarai: sarai la sposa  
d'Ippolito. Sei degna  
che il figlio fraetrato dell'Amazone  
teco partisca il talamo coperto  
coi velli dei leoni.  
E prima delle nozze  
Fedra ti condurrà  
sino all'isola Sferia (51).

The scene changes quickly, however, and Fedra becomes set on a violent sacrifice. This behavioral sea change is explicit in the stage directions: "Sotto lo sguardo crudele e divorante, la vergine comincia a irrigidirsi nella immobilità del terrore. La divinazione gonfia il suo petto. La sua voce si muta. Soffocato è il suo primo grido di veggente... Accesa dal desiderio folle più che dal crescente rossore dell'incendio e la figlia di Pasifae" (D'Annunzio, 53). Again, D'Annunzio ties Fedra's forceful character to mythic genealogy and to passionate instability. Furthermore, her treatment of Ipponoe is congruent with the imagery of possession that pervades the tragedy. During her sacrifice, Ipponoe, is "possessed" by Fedra in the same way that Fedra will attempt to possess her stepson Ippolito. According to Witt, "Fedra's scene with Ipponoe is in some ways a dress rehearsal for her scene with Ippolito. The latter

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repeats the movement from eroticized sweetness to the frenzy of desired passion” (Witt, 52). Even the slave’s name is reminiscent of Fedra’s obsession, Ippolito.

D’Annunzio continues further with the allusions, having Fedra recite to Ippolito at the end of Act I the verse he uses in the dedication to de Goloubeff (D’Annunzio, 61). While the slave herself plays a minor role, it can be argued that D’Annunzio makes space for this textual interlude in order to expose the necessity of Fedra’s unbridled behavior in creating a mythic protagonist capable of dramatic innovation.

Fedra, both in life and in death, is unforgettable. D’Annunzio repeats this mantra (*Fedra indimenticabile*) at the end of each of the three acts.<sup>14</sup> This narrative repetition elucidates her strength of character, particularly in regard to her unyielding passion, Ippolito’s death and ultimately her own. Instead of demurring as female leads traditionally do, Fedra boldly proclaims her love for Ippolito in effusive, erotic terms:

FEDRA  
Ah sii dolce, poi che dolce sei.  
T’ho veduto. Poi fendimi con tutta  
la tua forza, poi trattami qual fiera  
perseguitata dai tuoi cani, trattami  
quale preda raggiunta. Simmi dolce! ...  
Ma la Terra porterà  
ancora i giorni e gli uomini e le biade  
e l’opere e la guerra e il vino e i lutti  
innumerevoli, e non porterà  
un amore che sia come l’amore  
di Fedra (116).

Fedra’s bombastic declaration stands in direct contrast to Mirra’s continuous rhetorical dissimulation. While Mirra’s constant equivocation and unwillingness to

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admit the cause of her malaise leads her to choose suicide, Fedra's startling admission leads to an eminently lively image of almost ritualistic sacrifice. After being rejected, Fedra follows with a sadomasochistic wager, challenging Ippolito to rip open her chest to reveal her beating heart:

FEDRA  
Si, tra l'omero e la gola,  
colpiscimi! Con tutta la tua forza  
fendimi, sino alla cintura, ch'io  
ti mostri il cuore fumante, arso di te,  
consunto dalla peste insanabile (122).

Instead of being rendered ill by passion, Fedra is consumed with it. While her ardor may ultimately be self-destructive, it is nonetheless self-affirming.

Fedra, unlike Mirra, is not consumed by fateful passion, but rather is invigorated by it. When killed by Artemis' arrow (as revenge for the wrongful death of Ippolito by Poseidon, invoked by Theseus), she dies heroically, affirming her will and proclaiming her superiority over the forces which have destroyed her. During the death scene she asserts her autonomy over divine power, mythology, circumstance, the object of her desire Ippolito (whom she claims as her own), and the object of her disdain, her estranged husband Theseus:

FEDRA  
O dea,  
tu non hai più potenza.  
Spenti sono i tuoi fuochi. Un fuoco bianco  
io porto all'Ade. Ippolito  
io l'ho velato perché l'amo. È mio  
là dove tu non regni. Io vinco...  
Nel mio cuore non è più sangue umano,  
non è palpito. E giungere col dardo  
non puoi l'altra mia vita. Ancora vinco!

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Ippolito, son tecco (160-163).

Even in death, Fedra takes what she feels is rightfully her own. In this citation, she affirms her characterological agency by subordinating the power of the Goddess to her own desire. Specifically, it is in the moment of her death that she is able to explicitly state her victory and the spoils it brings. Thus, through Fedra's ruthless pursual of her desires until the last moment, D'Annunzio upends the tradition of self-denial and self-sacrifice on the part of tragic heroines.

D'Annunzio echoes this sentiment not only in the text but also in the interview with Renato Simoni of the *Corriere della sera*:

La mia eroina è, come in Euripide, come nel Racine, tutta invasa dal morbo insanabile.... Ma non è la gemebonda inferma euripidea che giace sul suo tormentoso letto e non osa parlare a Ippolito né osa parlare a Teseo, ma sol morire legando alle sue mani esanguì le tavolette accusatrici.... La mia eroina è veramente la Cretese 'che il vizio della patria arde e il suo vizio,' secondo l'espressione di Seneca... È nata nell'isola dei dardi e del dittamo, nella terra insanguinata dai sacrificii umani e assordata dal bronzo percosso dei Coricanti, nata dall'adultera dei pascoli e da quel crudele Minos che accese una così furibonda e criminosa passione in Sicilia, figlia di Niso. Ma ha, in una carne che pesa, una grande anima alata e ansiosa di volo (D'Annunzio, VII).

To illustrate Fedra's strength both in life and in death, the tragedian invokes a "primitive," earthly description in which the protagonist is irrevocably tied to her ancestral land by blood. By focusing on her pedigree, D'Annunzio connects Fedra's strength to a sort of geographical legacy, and uses this nativist claim to bolster her unyielding spirit, particularly during the final moments of the tragedy in which she maintains her assertiveness. These nationalist undertones are not just the musings of a passionate politico: they are poetic devices with which to reinforce the strength of

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and legitimize the conquests of his fierce protagonist. The description D'Annunzio paints of Euripides' infirm Phaedra both stands in contrast to the health of his new Fedra, and recalls the ailing constitution of Alfieri's Mirra who cannot speak, only writhe painfully in bed. Not coincidentally, these two descriptions are congruent with their respective endings.

While Mirra takes her own life, it is only to escape the shame of incestual love and the inauthenticity of living a lie. Mirra's suicide is self-affirming insofar as it is the ultimate manifestation of her transgressive feelings, yet its status as a common tragic ending and its existence within a greater and inescapable mythic construct renders it less powerful than Fedra's explosive sublimation. When Fedra dies, it is not an escape but rather a reclamation of what is rightfully hers: her passion for Ippolito and dominance over a mythic legacy. By indulging her frenzied Id, Fedra writes her own narrative in which passion is satiated, not shamed. Her ritualistic Dionysian revolt against divine order helps serve D'Annunzio's poetic project, the modernization of tragic drama. Despite these differences, death is a (paradoxically) formative event for both tragic heroines. For Mirra it is a release from worldly suffering, the only cure to Aphrodite's curse. For Fedra, both her own death (and the sacrifice of Ipponoe and murder of Ippolito) are moments in which she realizes her promethean strength. Thus, through mythic and textual innovation, D'Annunzio moves away from the classic cathartic ending employed by Alfieri, toward a catharsis in which passion is reclaimed and owned instead of purified, reversing the tradition of the tragic superman in favor of a superwoman.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Raymond Guess (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) xxv.

<sup>2</sup> Alfieri, *Mirra*, ed. Bruno Maier (Torino: Garzanti, 1990) xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> See text of D'Annunzio's article in Valentina Valentini, *La tragedia moderna e mediterranea* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990) 80.

<sup>4</sup> Witt, *The Search for Modern Tragedy: Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 38.

<sup>5</sup> Minervini, *Ontologia dell'eroe tragico* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2010) 36.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Carsaniga, *Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 398. See also: Camerino, *Alfieri e il linguaggio della tragedia* (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1999) 28: "Alfieri ripropone e ritraduce radicalmente, in una poetica moderna e in una semantica originale e irripetibile, alcuni fondamentali termini e indicazioni ovidiane."

<sup>7</sup> Rando, *Alfieri europeo: le sacrosante leggi* (Rubbettino Editore, 2007) 257-8.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, 54: "Greek tragedy perished differently from all other, older sister-arts: it dies by suicide, as the result of an irresolvable conflict, which is to say tragically, while all the others died the most beautiful and peaceful deaths, fading away at a great age."

<sup>9</sup> D'Annunzio, *Fedra*, ed. Pietro Gibellini (Milano: Mondadori, 2001) XIII.

<sup>10</sup> D'Annunzio, VII. Translated from the original French.

<sup>11</sup> D'Annunzio cites the archaeological excavations on the isle of Crete and his own trip to Greece in 1895 as formative literary experiences.

<sup>12</sup> D'Annunzio, X: "L'autore, nella tragedia, finisce per identificarsi non col giovane cacciatore e neppure con lo sventurato signore di Atene, ma con un personaggio di sua invenzione l'auriga-aedo Eurito, uomo d'azione e melodioso cantore che preannuncia la figura del poeta-soldato."

<sup>13</sup> D'Annunzio, 46: "A Ippolito sarà data Ipponoe."

<sup>14</sup> D'Annunzio, 60, 139 and 163.

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