

THE FIGURE OF THE WET NURSE FROM VITTORELLI TO PIRANDELLO

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Throughout history, certain categories of domestic labour have been considered the specific responsibility of women, contributing to what Daniela Perco has called ‘l’invisibile quotidiano’.¹ Though seemingly invisible, such workers were often essential to the successful functioning of many bourgeois and aristocratic Italian families. One such worker, the nursemaid—including both the dry nurse, who cared for a child without suckling it, and the wet nurse, who breastfed the children of other women—has a long, but understudied, presence in both visual arts and literature in Italy until the early twentieth century, after which the profession and its representation gradually disappeared with the invention of formula milk. In this note I will analyse the representation of the figure of the wet nurse in works by Iacopo Vittorelli (1749–1835), Ippolito Pindemonte (1753–1828), and Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), focusing in particular on the ways in which the individual identity of the wet nurse is consistently subjugated to her role as a domestic labourer.

VITTORELLI, ‘LA NUTRICE’

The eighteenth century witnessed an increase in the popularity of *poesie d’occasione*, poems composed for specific social occasions and usually addressed to members of the aristocracy.² *Poesie d’occasione* most often recorded marriages, deaths, monastic vows, graduations, births, and the like. Iacopo Vittorelli’s poem ‘La nutrice’ (1806), an ode dedicated to a ‘nobilissima sposa’, is a prime example of the genre, in which the poet suggests a list of qualities that a good wet nurse should possess in order to be recruited by an expectant mother.³

Vittorelli’s imagined young candidate is a picture of health: she is ‘giuliva nel sembiante’ and ‘composta nelle membra’ (lines 29–30). Furthermore, her moral and temperamental qualities are directly linked to her ability to provide quality milk to a child:

¹ Daniela Perco, ‘Balie da latte. Note e testimonianze su alcune esperienze di lavoro’, in *Balie da latte. Una forma peculiare di emigrazione temporanea*, ed. by Daniela Perco (Feltre: Comunità montana feltrina, 1984), pp. 15–50 (p. 15).

² *Poesie d’occasione* were so popular in the mid-eighteenth century that many poets produced parodic versions; see, for example, Domenico Balestrieri, *Lagrima in morte di un gatto* (Milan: Maresis, 1741).

³ Iacopo Vittorelli, ‘La nutrice. Ode diretta a nobilissima sposa’, in *Rime di Jacopo Vittorelli, nuova edizione dall’autore medesimo accresciuta, e unicamente approvata* (Bassano del Grappa: Remondini, 1806), pp. 61–73 (p. 61). All subsequent quotations of Vittorelli’s poetry are taken from this edition and are cited by line number.

Ah! Quell'anima serena,
 Quel modesto e ingenuo ciglio
 Ben sapranno al caro figlio
 Puro latte apparecchiare.

(lines 33–36)

However, Vittorelli's idealistic depiction differs markedly from any probable reality, since wet nurses were most often women who had recently experienced the loss of a child, or new mothers who had been forced to abandon their own babies in order to breastfeed the children of others due to financial need.⁴ While Vittorelli draws attention to the practical benefits of a healthy wet nurse, the theme of breastfeeding has a long literary history and has enjoyed various metaphorical associations, spanning from the New Testament epistles, in which milk symbolizes the first spiritual nourishment offered to Christian infants, to Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, in which breastmilk is linked to the acquisition of language.⁵

Beyond an ability to breastfeed, Vittorelli lists the desirable qualities that a good wet nurse from the countryside should possess. Suggestions principally concern the wet nurse's diet, including the instruction that she should only eat wheat from the fields and drink clean water from rivers. Moreover, Vittorelli suggests that the wet nurse should not be fed with 'cibo pingue e delicato', because 'son migliori i cibi agresti | erbe, poma, e latte, e miel' (lines 45–48). Additionally, the noble lady who hires the wet nurse should be careful that she does not drink 'i pungenti amari sali | del volatile caffè' (lines 51–52), for it can irritate the baby through soiled milk. Vittorelli also suggests that it is best to breastfeed the baby 'a ciel sereno' in the countryside, rather than in the shadow 'de la stanza signoril' (lines 65–68).

Aristocratic and bourgeois families during the nineteenth century often resorted to private wet nursing, which used to be carried out in one of two ways: either by entrusting the new-born child to a country wet nurse, who would raise the child in her own home and return it to the parents when weaning was complete (as in Vittorelli's poem), or by hosting the wet nurse in the employer's home, so as to be able to control the process of raising and educating the child.⁶ The first option was clearly preferred by Vittorelli, who underlines the importance of the wet nurse's singing skills and her expertise in swaddling the baby. Vittorelli also insists on the importance of a wet nurse's singing skills in his sonnet *Alla Nobile Signora Francesca Negri per la nascita del suo Primogenito*, in which he suggests that the baby be breastfed by Lauretta, the

⁴ See Anna Bellavitis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe*, trans. by Clelia Boscolo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 135.

⁵ Maurizio Fiorilla, 'La metafora del latte in Dante tra tradizione classica e cristiana', in *La metafora in Dante*, ed. by Marco Ariani (Florence: Olschki, 2009), pp. 149–65 (p. 150). On the cultural significance of the nursing mother in medieval discussions of language and selfhood, see also Gary P. Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*, The William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante Studies, 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

⁶ Rossella Ropa, 'Tra due secoli. I lavori di cura', in *Donne e lavoro: un'identità difficile. Lavoratrici in Emilia Romagna (1860–1960)*, ed. by Rossella Ropa and Cinzia Venturoli (Bologna: Compositori, 2010), pp. 35–52 (p. 36).

eponymous Francesca Negri's sister, as she was considered an excellent singer. Vittorelli strictly differentiates the roles of the two women:

Lasciala in cura a lei, che d'ogni eletta
Voce melodiosa il pregio annulla.
Tu sei madre d'un figlio, e a te si aspetta
Vegliare intorno a la felice culla.

(lines 5–8)

Nonetheless, despite concluding his checklist by declaring that 'questi [...] son gli studii di Colei, | che prescelsero gli Dei | al bambin, tuo dolce amor' (lines 177–80), Vittorelli grants that, should the mother want to suckle her baby herself, she should be free to do so, citing as his authority a poem from 1788 by Ippolito Pindemonte that praises the countess Teodora Lisca for breastfeeding her own child:

Che se un dolce interno affetto,
O Amarille, ti dicesse,
Porgi, porgi le tue stesse
Nivee poppe al figliuolin:

Cedi, o Bella, e avrai dal chiaro
Pindemonte in Elicona
La medesima corona,
Ch'ei tessè di Dori al crin.

(lines 185–92)

In the poem to which Vittorelli alludes, *Per la Sig.ra Contessa Teodora Lisca Pompei che allatta il suo figliuolino*, Pindemonte criticized the upper classes' habit of entrusting new-borns to wet nurses from the countryside.⁷ Indeed, such decisions were sometimes fiercely contested by contemporaries, and it was often said that the children were considered inconveniences by mothers of the upper bourgeoisie.⁸ Pindemonte gives two reasons why the mother's own milk was preferable. Firstly, the mother's milk was considered to be more genuine than the milk coming from the wet nurse ('latte che gli potria tornar veleno' [line 8]). Secondly, and more importantly, Pindemonte's poem appeals to the emotional connection between a mother and her child, to which the wet nurse could potentially pose a disruption: 'Dell'amor suo non soffrirò ch'esulti | altri pria che sua madre' (lines 17–18).

There were also other possible reasons that mothers should apparently be wary of employing wet nurses; in nineteenth-century England, for example, many medical authorities believed that 'the milk of an irritable or bad-tempered nurse could injure or even kill the child', a danger that was particularly associated with red hair, leading 'a

⁷ Ippolito Pindemonte, 'Per la Sig.ra Contessa Teodora Lisca Pompei che allatta il suo figliuolino', in *Poesie di Ippolito Pindemonte veronese* (Pisa: Nuova Tipografia, 1798), pp. 99–104.

⁸ Ropa, p. 36.

number of authorities to advise against the employment of red-haired wetnurses'.⁹ Furthermore, due to their provenance from the countryside, many wet nurses were suspected of witchcraft, and, in some cases, even of heresy.¹⁰ In a related vein, Giacomo Leopardi in his 1815 *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* inveighs against 'those caretakers [...] and wet-nurses [...] who threaten children with bogies', causing indelible shock to the tender minds of infants.¹¹

Hiring a wet nurse was therefore a potentially risky affair for aristocratic families, a fact which explains Vittorelli's emphasis on the importance of a considered recruitment process. Nonetheless, by the mid-nineteenth century there were a number of institutionalized means by which wet nurses could be obtained, and the practice of mercenary wet nursing became increasingly popular. Such a custom gave rise to a real exodus that affected a significant proportion of the Italian female population, with thousands of young women, mostly belonging to the labouring class and therefore driven by need and poverty, being forced to leave their homes and children in order to find gainful employment and, very occasionally, a level of independence.¹² The price of such emancipation, though, was that wet nurses were uprooted from their nearest and dearest to undergo a transformation that only partially alleviated the pain of abandonment by offering a way of life far from the food shortages and domestic chores they left behind.¹³ Wet nurses' emancipation often also brought about a conspicuous change in appearance. Indeed, far from the rustic naïveté praised by Vittorelli, the tide of wet nurses who moved to the city gained new wardrobes, hairstyles and behaviours as they adapted to their new urban lives.¹⁴ Thus, their adaptation to the social level of the family that employed them became both a requirement for and a consequence of their new role.

PIRANDELLO, *NOVELLE PER UN ANNO*

Almost a century after the publication of 'La nutrice', Vittorelli's criteria for a successful wet nurse remained largely unchanged, as demonstrated by Luigi Pirandello's various depictions of the figure in his *Novelle per un anno* (1884–1936), a collection of short stories. Most of the wet nurses depicted in Pirandello's short stories are presented primarily as workers, and only marginally as human beings, as if to suggest that the real characters in the stories are aristocratic families, with the wet nurses occupying only ancillary roles, both socially and in terms of the narrative. Most

⁹ Ann Roberts, 'Mothers and Babies: The Wet Nurse and Her Employer in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England', *Women's Studies*, 3 (1976), 279–93 (p. 283).

¹⁰ Bellavitis, p. 145.

¹¹ Fabio Camilletti, 'Leopardi's Night (T)errors, the Uncanny, and the "Old Wives' Tales"', in *Archaeology of the Unconscious: Italian Perspectives*, ed. by Alessandra Aloisi and Fabio Camilletti (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 67–85 (p. 68).

¹² Ropa, p. 37.

¹³ Lisa Sarti, "'Noi donne siamo fatte per patire". Trame femminili a confronto ne *La balia* di Pirandello, dalla pagina allo schermo', *Pirandelliana*, 5 (2011), 143–53 (p. 143).

¹⁴ Adriana Dadà, 'Partire per un figlio altrui: racconti delle balie nel Novecento', in *Altrove. Viaggi di donne dall'antichità al Novecento*, ed. by Dinora Corsi (Rome: Viella, 1999), pp. 111–31.

elements of Vittorelli's ode remain valid, such as the provenance of the wet nurse from the countryside, her young age, and her good health, while other elements, such as the death of her own baby, are added as documents of social history. In the novella *O di uno o di nessuno* (1912), for instance, the two main characters, Carlino e Tito, urgently require a wet nurse due to the unexpected death of Melina, the third member of their *ménage à trois* who died shortly after giving birth. An old woman tells them about a young woman she knows, presenting her as a potential candidate:

conosceva lei una balia, una contadina d'Alatri, venuta a sgravarsi all'ospedale di San Giovanni: era uscita da parecchi giorni; il figlietto le era morto, e quella sera stessa sarebbe ripartita per Alatri: buona, ottima giovine; maritata, sì; il marito le era partito da pochi mesi per l'America; sana, forte; il figlietto le era morto per disgrazia, nel parto, non già per malattia.¹⁵

In the guise of a recruiter, the old woman underlines that the candidate is a peasant, married, and healthy, and that her baby died 'per disgrazia', due to an accident, and not due to illness. The two men decide to give the baby to the wet nurse in the countryside—'meglio che il bimbo andasse lontano, affidato alla balia' (*NA*, I, p. 518)—only visiting him to check on the nurse. However, it is soon made clear that the child will need a proper education, and that the wet nurse is not able to provide him with one:

Per ora, Nilli era piccino piccino, e poteva star lì con la balia, che assicurava di volerlo tenere con sé, come un figliuolo, almeno fino al ritorno del marito dall'America. Ma non ci poteva star sempre! Crescendo, bisognava pur dargli una certa educazione.

(*NA*, I, p. 519)

The same characterization of a poorly educated wet nurse appears in Pirandello's novella 'Nenia' (1901), in which a wet nurse is portrayed during a journey in a third-class wagon while singing to a crying infant. Echoing Vittorelli's advice as to the benefits of a wet nurse's singing ability, Pirandello describes the contrast between the nurse's rough appearance and her gentle voice:

E accennava, svogliata, quasi prolungando un sospiro d'impazienza, un motivo di nenia paesana. [...] A un tratto, nella cupa ombra della sera imminente, dalle labbra di quella rozza contadinona si svolse a mezza voce, con soavità inverosimile, con fascino d'ineffabile amarezza, la nenia mesta [...].

(*NA*, I, p. 525)

The figure of a rough nurse hailing from the countryside is also reiterated in Pirandello's novella 'In silenzio' (1905), in which a young woman recruited to breastfeed a newborn baby behaves poorly and unprofessionally. Her employer even hesitates in reproaching her, scared that this could have repercussions for the baby: 'e a

¹⁵ Luigi Pirandello, *Novelle per un anno*, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1954), I, p. 517 [henceforth *NA*].

muoverne a quella balia il minimo rimprovero, già la certezza d'indispettirla e il pericolo ch'ella approfittasse dell'assenza di lui per sfogare il dispetto contro la creaturina innocente' (*NA*, II, p. 218). However, though highly criticized ('Brutta zoticonna, venuta su dalla campagna che pareva un tronco d'albero, e che ora credeva di farsi bella, pettinandosi coi capelli alti e infronzolandosi' [*NA*, II, p. 219]), the wet nurse excels in producing quality milk, a pivotal requirement of her role: 'Ma pazienza! Il latte, lo aveva buono; e il bimbo, quantunque trascurato, prosperava' (*NA*, II, p. 219). Such a comment, once again, sheds light on the wet nurse's status as a domestic worker who, though inadequate in other respects, is valued chiefly for her ability to express milk.

In a similar vein, Pirandello's novella 'La balia' (1903), which tells the story of Annicchia and her relocation from the countryside to the city of Rome, shows how wet nurses were increasingly considered solely on the basis of their productive value, even more so than in the early nineteenth century. At first, Annicchia is shocked by the offer to go to Rome, because it means the abandonment of her child, a common fate for wet nurses, as discussed above.¹⁶ Later in the story, Annicchia's own child dies while she is in Rome, nursing Ersilia's baby. Annicchia's mourning leaves Ersilia indifferent, and she eventually fires the wet nurse when she loses her milk due to the shock of her bereavement. Having lost her milk, Annicchia soon becomes completely unsuitable for her job.

Pirandello's 'La balia' also sheds light on the important social role which wet nurses clearly occupied in urban upper-class families. Indeed, the social impact that the wet nurse would have had in Roman aristocratic society seems to be the second most important criterion for Ersilia and her parents in their search for a wet nurse. As soon as Ersilia's mother sees Annicchia, she pictures her in the context of the family's social life:

la signora Manfroni osservava la giovine e, con l'immaginazione, la parava da balia e approvava col capo, approvava come se già la vedesse con un goffo zendado rosso in testa e uno spillone dai tremuli fiori d'argento tra i biondi capelli.

(*NA*, II, p. 299)

Not only, then, does the wet nurse have to provide good milk for the newborn, but also, as a new key requirement, she needs to possess physical qualities that allow her to debut in society and look like a lady.

CONCLUSION

Wet-nursing, though today an almost forgotten form of female labour, has a long and rich history as a literary trope in Italian poetry and prose. Through an analysis of Vittorelli's 'La nutrice' and a selection of short stories from Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno*, we see that the characterization of this marginalized female labourer remains

¹⁶ Sarti, p. 114.

fairly consistent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the wet nurse being characterized chiefly as a source of nourishment for new-born babies of aristocratic families, and at times also as a luxury object to be showcased by her employers. From the end of the nineteenth century, however, with the invention of readily available formula milk, literary depictions of the figure begin to dwindle. Without a need for their labour, wet nurses gradually disappear from the pages of Italian literature altogether.