

Alfieri's Tragic Women: Silence, Sacrifice, and Infidelity

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Author's Note

In this dissertation, I have made the decision not to provide translations for the verses cited from Alfieri's tragedies. Alfieri's distinctive style, which relies on a relatively limited but highly significant vocabulary, deliberate syntactical distortions, and frequent brachylogies, is difficult to render in English. No English translation could do justice to Alfieri's Italian, which he, as a native Piedmontese, honed over the course of many years and considered fundamental to the new style of Italian tragedy he sought to develop. However, English translations of Alfieri's tragedies do exist. In 1815, the Englishman Charles Lloyd published translations of nineteen of Alfieri's tragedies. Decades later, in 1876, Edgar Alfred Bowring, another Englishman, revised Lloyd's translations after finding them inadequate. Bowring offered the first, and only, complete English translation of Alfieri's tragedies and even dedicated the work to the people of the then recently united Italy. Both Lloyd's and Bowring's translations convey much of the meaning but little of the spirit or vigor of Alfieri's originals, and I have therefore chosen not to rely on them. It is my hope that the synopses of the tragedies that I have included in the appendix will compensate, at least in part, for the lack of a translation. For the sake of consistency and so as not to overcrowd the page, I have not provided translations for the other Italian sources, both primary and secondary, that I cite in this study. These include Alfieri's sonnets that I cite in the fourth chapter. While in the case of Alfieri my decision not to translate his verses preserves the integrity of his tragic and poetic visions, I apologize in advance to the reader for any inconvenience that might result.

Introduction

Background.

This present study aims to illuminate the role that women exercise in the tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803). It takes as its overall goal an analysis of Alfierian heroines through close textual readings, while its subgoals are twofold: first, I argue that the heroine has a critical function in Alfierian tragic theater that differs her from the hero and imparts to her a distinct value. Because she is an ambivalent figure whose contradictions and complexities emerge from her presence in a genre that does not embrace her unconditionally, the heroine filters Alfieri's own anxieties concerning tragedy in late eighteenth-century Italy and his place within its development. The heroine becomes a means through which Alfieri can distinguish himself from his tragic predecessors, a sort of heuristic that reveals both his deviation from preexisting tragic models and his lingering adherence to them. Second, through an examination of the diversity of the heroine's experience in Alfierian tragedies, I argue that Alfierian tragic theater demonstrates a keen and complex interest in the representation of women. This interest is recurrent and spans the entirety of Alfieri's career as a tragedian but has been underrecognized. With this study, I aim to show that Alfierian tragic theater, whose political and domestic themes have long been accepted, presents itself as a critical arena of women not only within contemporary Italian drama but in eighteenth-century European dramatic production, more broadly speaking. In other words, it offers dynamic, challenging, and contradictory representations of tragic womanhood that merit additional study.

The sheer number of Alfierian heroines make them difficult subjects to analyze as an entire group. This difficulty is linked to the longstanding struggle to comprehend, even to justify, women's presence within tragedy as a genre. In eighteenth-century Italy, in the decades preceding Alfieri's career as a tragedian, the uncertainty regarding women's place in tragedy was felt in the

debates on the character of Italian tragedy, which assumed patriotic significance. Playwrights and literary critics such as Gianvincenzo Gravina, Scipione Maffei, and Pier Jacopo Martello argued for the development of an Italian tragic theater that was distinct from its French counterpart, and resented the influence of French trends on Italian tragic production. Notably, these trends, including French tragedy's proclivity for romantic intrigue and frivolous side plots, were derided for the effeminate quality they were seen as imparting to tragedy.¹ More importantly, it was often only in critiquing French tragedy's overabundance of love affairs that Italian intellectuals brought women into the discussion at all. For example, in his treatise *Della tragedia*, first published in 1715, Gravina criticizes modern tragedy for its lack of variety, which he believes is due to its overuse of love as the plot's principal motivating force:

E questo chimerico amore ancora più d'ogn'altro ha esclusa dai nostri teatri la varietà: poiché, dandosi luogo solo a questo, rimane abbandonata ogni espressione di altro costume e di altra passione, comparando solo in iscena una schiera di paladini, che riscaldano l'aria coi sospiri, ed ascondono il sole col lampo delle loro spade; ed alla presenza delle loro signore allagano il teatro di lagrime, ed assordano gli spettatori con lo strepito delle lor catene, che si tiran dietro per entro la carcere.²

One of the founders of the Accademia dell'Arcadia, Gravina argues that love reduces tragic heroes to weeping prisoners, their chains signifying on a metaphorical level their bondage to a plot device considered unbecoming of tragedy, because it is too feminine, while their tears become an unmistakable mark of their effeminacy.

In 1777, Pietro Napoli Signorelli published *Storia critica de' teatri antichi e moderni*, which he later amplified in a second version published between 1787 and 1790. In this comparative look at the differences between ancient and modern tragedy, Signorelli, who also offered

¹ Enrico Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1994), 60.

² Gianvincenzo Gravina, *Della tragedia*, in *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. Amedeo Quondam (Rome: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1973), 531.

commentary on Alfierian tragedies, appraises the role of love in seventeenth-century French tragedy. He notes that in the tragic works of Corneille and Racine love plots were often unable to generate in their audience enough passion and admiration. Signorelli writes that Corneille's love plots fail to match the depictions of virtue and heroism with which they are coupled and so become "freddi e poco tragici."³ If Racine has more success in crafting love plots, Signorelli nonetheless admits that they are not "sempre proprio per la grandezza del coturno perché non sempre principale e furioso, ma sempre idoneo a commuovere."⁴ He next observes that young people, especially tender and impressionable young ladies, fail to comprehend or be moved by the solemn dignity of the tragic genre's typical cast of characters, i.e. male tyrants and conquerors, Romans and Greeks. Nor do they, Signorelli writes, have any interest in these figures:

La gioventù, e specialmente le donne pieghevoli alla tenerezza, poco intendono e poco prendono interesse, p.e., nelle vedute politiche di un tiranno, nell'ambizione di un conquistatore, nel patriottissimo eroico di un romano o di un greco.⁵

Instead, Signorelli argues that women are drawn to seemingly more relatable characters, such as Racine's Bérénice, who must endure a painful parting from her lover, Titus.⁶ While his critique of Racine's depiction of love is not entirely disparaging, the distinction that Signorelli makes between male and female characters speaks to certain anxieties regarding the place of women within tragedy and the capacity of authors to make women, including female spectators, conform to the dictates of the tragic genre, which in eighteenth-century Italy derived, if not without opposition, from

³ Pietro Napoli Signorelli, *Storia critica de' teatri antichi e moderni*, in *Dal Muratori al Cesarotti*, bk. 4, *Critici e storici della poesia e delle arti nel secondo Settecento*, ed. Emilio Bigi (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1960), 617.

⁴ Signorelli, 617.

⁵ Signorelli, 617.

⁶ "Tutte le donne possono comprendere senza stento la dolorosa separazione di Tito e Berenice" (Signorelli, 617).

Aristotelian precepts and the imitation of Latin and Greek drama. Signorelli, in fact, notes that in Greek tragedy love was not incorporated into the plot since it was deemed “non convenevole.”⁷

Writing some sixty years earlier, the dramatist Pier Jacopo Martello observed that if Greek tragedians neglected to represent love, it was because women were prevented from attending the theater. However, if eighteenth-century women flocked to the theater, it became therefore necessary to depict love so as to maintain the interest of female spectators. By representing a passion to which women were seen as naturally inclined, dramatists could satisfy the didactic function of tragedy through demonstrations of how women could moderate this passion. In *Della tragedia antica e moderna* (1714), Martello writes: “Così viensi ad ottener l’utile del moderar la passione, trattandola nelle guise che van d’accordo con l’onestà, e si consegue l’applauso e il compiacimento dell’uditorio, che per la maggior parte è di femmine.”⁸

Martello’s interpretation sought to legitimize the role of love in Italian tragedy to a certain extent, with this love still simultaneously coded as French and feminine. His commentary on love, along with that of Gravina and Signorelli, was motivated, in large measure, by the interest on the part of eighteenth-century Italian intellectuals not only to define the features of an autonomous Italian tragic theater but to trace its descent from classical tragedy. In eighteenth-century Italian treatises on tragedy, the recurrent juxtaposition of love and women, however, suggests that there were limits to women’s participation in the genre. In *De’ teatri antichi e moderni* (1754), Scipione Maffei includes a chapter examining the reasons why women were excluded from the classical stage and argues that early Christian theologians’ condemnation of theater did not extend to female

⁷ Signorelli, 621.

⁸ Pier Jacopo Martello, *Della tragedia antica e moderna*, in *Scritti critici e satirici*, ed. Hannibal S. Noce (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1963), 237.

actors.⁹ Nonetheless, women are very rarely addressed as a specific group in these treatises, and when they are mentioned at all, it is often, as previously seen, in conjunction with the criticism of love plots or as a gauge by which to measure modern tragedy's deviation from classical models of heroism. Martello derisively refers to modern tragic heroes as "lovers" in the hands of less adept tragedians and of the hero's character states that "l'amore non serve che a rovinarlo."¹⁰ Seen as effeminate and the domain of women, love ran the risk of devitalizing tragedy's evocation of the traditional sentiments of pity and terror as well as horror, another passion viewed as consonant with the genre.¹¹

In the nineteenth century, Francesco de Sanctis advanced the work of eighteenth-century literary critics who were intent on proposing an autonomous Italian tragic theater. Although not limiting himself to the tragic genre, de Sanctis included a lengthy examination of Alfierian tragedy in his seminal *Storia della letteratura italiana*, which appraised Italian literature from the Middle Ages to present day and was first published in two volumes between 1870-1871. In his influential evaluation of Alfierian tragedy, de Sanctis praises the patriotic and political intensity of Alfieri's tragic production but finds his individual tragic heroes and heroines altogether unmemorable. Writing that Alfieri lacks the "scienza della vita"¹² that would otherwise allow him to imbue his

⁹ See the chapter "Come anticamente nelle Tragedie e nelle Comedie non recitavan donne," in Maffei, *De' teatri antichi e moderni*, in *De' teatri antichi e moderni e altri scritti teatrali*, ed. Laura Sannia Nowé (Modena: Mucchi, 1988), 210-224.

¹⁰ Martello, *Della tragedia antica e moderna*, 233.

¹¹ For an analysis of the eighteenth-century Italian intellectual debate on the passions that good tragedy was supposed to elicit, see Mattioda's chapter "Le passioni tragiche," in *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento*, 17-74.

¹² Francesco de Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 2 (Naples: Morano, 1870), 442.

tragic figures with nuance, de Sanctis argues that Alfieri's heroes and heroines are, instead, hardly distinct from each other. He writes:

Fra tanto calore la composizione riesce nel suo insieme fredda e monotona, perchè in quell'esaltazione fittizia del discorso ti senti nel vuoto, e perchè fra tanti motti e sentenze memorabili non ricordi un solo personaggio, uomo o donna che sia. Non uno è rimasto vivo.¹³

Despite this negative assessment, de Sanctis does specify that Alfierian heroes are slightly more generic than Alfierian heroines in a subtle, and fleeting, acknowledgement of the differences inherent in Alfieri's depiction of male and female heroism.¹⁴

Within wider European criticism on tragedy in the nineteenth century, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche each addressed the crisis of tragedy and the incompatibility of ancient tragedy with secular modernity. The place of women in tragedy does not feature as a specific concern in their theories, with the general category of hero typically subsuming the figure of the heroine. For example, without differentiating between heroes and heroines, Hegel, who otherwise makes his predilection for the tragedy *Antigone* clear, argues that the hero of modern tragedy is more subjective and subjected to passions than his classical counterpart.¹⁵ Nietzsche later insists on the ancient tragic hero's descent from the god Dionysus, emphasizing the androcentric nature of tragedy.¹⁶ It is Kierkegaard, however, who offers the most sustained reflection on a tragic heroine. In his essay "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture

¹³ De Sanctis, 442-443.

¹⁴ "E il difetto è maggiore negli eroi, soprattutto ne' rari casi che la forza è con loro e sono essi i vincitori" (de Sanctis, 443).

¹⁵ For a collection of Hegel's thoughts on tragedy, which are scattered throughout his writings, see Anne and Henry Paolucci, eds., *Hegel on Tragedy* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1975).

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1967), 73-74.

in *Fragmentary Endeavor*” (1843), the Danish philosopher proposes a new Antigone in whom the forces of modern and ancient tragedy achieve a perfect synthesis.¹⁷ Crucially, key to this synthesis is love, earlier rejected by eighteenth-century Italian literary critics as a worthy tragic thematic, since Antigone’s impossible love for her cousin combines with the classical inheritance of guilt from Oedipus to produce the tragic collision which results in her death.¹⁸

Unlike nineteenth-century tragic criticism which rarely discriminated between male and female tragic figures and conceptualized universal standards of heroism in which the tragic heroine was categorically subsumed by the tragic hero, twentieth- and twenty-first-century tragic criticism has drawn attention to the precariousness of the position typically occupied by women in tragedy. It has also highlighted the ways in which female characters can be argued to resist the generic limitations that tragedy imposes on their representation. In *Soul and Form* (1911), György Lukács questions whether women can attain an autonomous identity within a genre whose form is the concretized manifestation of the male hero’s quest for selfhood. “Tragedy is the becoming-real of the concrete, essential nature of man,” Lukács writes.¹⁹ For the Hungarian philosopher, tragedy’s intrinsically androcentric nature limits the extent to which women can be represented by the genre: “Can a woman be tragic in herself and not in relation to the man of her life? Can freedom become a real value in a woman’s life?”²⁰ Lukács’s queries cast doubt on tragedy’s capacity to treat its

¹⁷ This essay was included in *Either/Or*, first published in 1843. See Kierkegaard, “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor,” in *Either/Or, Part I*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Kierkegaard adapts the Hegelian concept of the tragic collision. On the relationship between Hegel and Kierkegaard, see Adam Wood, “Is the Tragic Always Tragic? Kierkegaard on Antiquity and Modernity in Shakespeare,” in the *Locus of Tragedy*, eds. Arthur Cools, Thomas Crombez, Rosa Slegers, and Johan Traels (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), 121-137.

¹⁹ Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974), 162.

²⁰ Lukacs, 174.

heroines as it does its heroes and to create fully realized female tragic figures whose significance exists independently of male characters.

On the other hand, in *The Hidden God*, originally published in 1955, Lucien Goldmann observes that Racine's great tragic figures are almost invariably women but declines to investigate further, stating: "Once again, the seventeenth century would not have accepted that such overwhelming passion could form so essential a part of the humanity of a man. However, these are incidental considerations which in no way affect the essential characteristics of each of his [Racine's] plays."²¹ Although Racine is the object of his study, Goldmann hesitates to differentiate between the figure of the female heroine and that of the male hero, and uses hero as a catchall term despite his close examination of Racinian heroines and his otherwise careful consideration of the historical and philosophical context of Racinian tragedy.

Tragedy's resistance to women and the feminine has, however, often been noted by feminist scholars and scholars of classical tragedy. Nicole Loraux²² and Laura McClure,²³ for example, have both examined classical tragedy's complex gender constructs, with Loraux, in particular, investigating how Greek drama often reinforces gender distinctions and simultaneously blurs the boundaries that separate the male and the female. Victoria Wohl argues that Greek drama treats women as a contradiction, observing that woman "is the locus, as well as object, of tragedy's

²¹ Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1977), 317.

²² See the following works by Nicole Loraux: *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); *The Experience of Tiresias: The Feminine and Greek Man*, trans. Paula Wissing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. Corinne Pache (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²³ See Laura McClure, *Spoken like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and André Lardinois and Laura McClure, eds., *Making Silence Speak. Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

most intense ideological negotiations. She is simultaneously the cornerstone of tragedy's project of world-building and a point of instability within the world that results."²⁴ Feminist scholars have regularly incorporated into their own analyses of other disciplines the complexity and contradictions that they view as underlying tragedy's assimilation of gender. Operating within carefully constructed psychoanalytic and semiotic frameworks, Julia Kristeva, Teresa de Lauretis, and Linda Kintz have all taken classical tragedy—notably, Oedipal tragedy—as a point of departure in their studies of the representation of women in literature, cinema, and modern drama.²⁵ De Lauretis's work has been particularly useful in helping this present study tease out the interplay between Alfieri's tragic representations of gender and the eighteenth-century Italian sociocultural and intellectual milieu that generated them. Concerning herself with what she terms the "experience of gender," de Lauretis writes that this experience refers to the "meaning effects and self-representations produced in the subject by the sociocultural practices, discourses, and institutions devoted to the production of women and men."²⁶ Alfierian tragedy is motivated by the temporal contradiction it simultaneously establishes in its insistence on resurrecting the distant classical past and in its direct emergence from the various polemics specific to eighteenth-century Italian debates on tragedy. The first is perceived in Alfieri's choice of tragic subject matter, which borrows heavily from Greek and Latin drama, albeit often filtered through seventeenth-century French treatments, and is also expressed in the tragedian's recurrent references to his profound

²⁴ Victoria Wohl, "Tragedy and Feminism," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 156.

²⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); and Linda Kintz, *The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).

²⁶ De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 19.

nostalgia for the classical age and his disdain for the present age in which he lives, an age dominated by pettiness, political tyranny, and apathy. The second is substantiated by Alfieri's efforts to create an authentically Italian tragic theater uncorrupted by French influence, the preoccupation of many Italian treatises on tragedy. Alfierian tragedy therefore looks to the past while remaining firmly rooted in the eighteenth century.²⁷ Within this temporal contradiction lie Alfieri's various depictions of tragic women, who, although often fashioned from classical precedent, nonetheless reflect the stance Alfieri takes in contemporary debates on suitable tragic forms and thematics. While there has been significant interest in examining constructions of gender identity, especially with regard to literary production, in eighteenth-century Italy,²⁸ the construction of gender identity in Alfierian tragedy in relation to contemporary Italian debates on the tragic genre has been largely unexplored.

This study looks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that explores the role that women play in Alfieri's depictions of tragic heroism. Despite their number and their centrality to Alfieri's tragic production, Alfierian female characters have traditionally been inconsistently studied from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint. In 1900, Teresa Magnoni published *Le*

²⁷ George Steiner writes that Alfieri "belongs, moreover, to that school of drama which sought to combine classic forms with romantic values. In Alfieri, as in Byron, the neoclassic conventions run directly against the grain of an intensely lyric and romantic temper. This gives to Alfieri's plays their very special quality: they have a kind of fever coldness," *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 213.

²⁸ See Marco Cerruti, ed., *Il 'genio muliebre': Percorsi di donne intellettuali fra Settecento e Novecento in Piemonte* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1993); Adriana Chemello and Luisa Ricaldone, *Geografie e genealogie letterarie: Erudite, biografate, croniste, narratrici, épistolières, utopiste tra Settecento e Ottocento* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2000); Cristina Passetti and Lucio Tufano, eds., *Femminile e maschile nel Settecento* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2018); Luisa Ricaldone, *La scrittura nascosta: Donne di lettere e loro immagini tra Arcadia e Restaurazione* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996). For the historical contextualization of women in the eighteenth century, see the following studies of Luciano Guerci: *La discussione sulla donna nell'Italia del Settecento: Aspetto e problemi* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1987); and *La sposa obbediente: Donna e matrimonio nella discussione dell'Italia del Settecento* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1988).

*donne nelle tragedie di Vittorio Alfieri*²⁹; her study was followed over two decades later by Ines Ceccoli's *L'eroina alfieriana* (1926).³⁰ The analyses of both works are limited by their application of a restrictive Crocean outlook, which divorces the Alfierian heroines under examination from the historical, philosophical, and literary contexts that shaped them and does not consider their relationship with Alfierian male heroes and tyrants. Additionally, both Magnoni's and Ceccoli's studies, perhaps unsurprisingly, adhere to a narrow, now antiquated, idea of femininity and often criticize Alfierian heroines for their virility and lack of delicacy.

Still within the realm of twentieth-century Alfierian criticism, the work of Mario Fubini provides notable insight into the psychological complexities of Alfierian heroines, although it, too, adopts a Crocean perspective and is not exclusively dedicated to Alfierian female figures.³¹ Similarly to Fubini, other important mid-twentieth-century scholars such as Walter Binni,³² Raffaello Ramat,³³ Franco Fido,³⁴ and Arnaldo Di Benedetto³⁵ move beyond de Sanctis's interest in the political and patriotic aspect of Alfierian tragedy and locate in Alfierian tragic theater the representation of psychologically complex tragic figures, who take on the dimensions of characters

²⁹ See Teresa Magnoni, *Le donne delle tragedie di Vittorio Alfieri* (Naples: Priore, 1900).

³⁰ See Ines Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1926).

³¹ See, in particular, Mario Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1953).

³² For Binni's collected essays on Alfieri, see *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015); and *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015)

³³ See Raffaello Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1958).

³⁴ See Franco Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato: Un dilemma settecentesco dagli aristotelici al Foscolo," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate. Il divenire dei generi fra Sette e Ottocento* (Florence: Vallecchi, Editore, 1989), 11-40.

³⁵ See Arnaldo Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite: Un'interpretazione di Vittorio Alfieri* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1994).

from bourgeois drama. Although these scholars do not limit their analyses to Alfierian heroines, their work has influenced subsequent studies that provide a closer look at the representation of Alfierian female figures.

Starting in 2000, these studies of Alfierian women have appeared with greater frequency. In that year, Paola Trivero published *Tragiche donne*, which broadens its scope to include analyses of tragic female figures from multiple eighteenth-century Italian authors, not simply Alfieri. In her study, Trivero classes eighteenth-century heroines according to four selected typologies (i.e. mother, stepmother, wife, and lover) and situates Alfierian heroines within the long and dynamic development of female tragic figures in the eighteenth century. In 2012, Stephanie Laggini Fiore published *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* with the goal of reading Alfierian heroines through a historically, rather than theoretically, feminist lens.³⁶ In 2017, Laura Nay included a chapter exclusively dedicated to Alfierian female figures in *La tirannide degli affetti. 'Affetti naturali' e 'affetti di libertà' nelle tragedie alfieriane*. Extending Arnaldo Di Benedetto's reading of Alfierian tragedy as a "teatro delle passioni" as opposed to a political theater,³⁷ Nay views most Alfierian heroes and heroines as belonging to a domestic pantheon, a "tragico pantheon familiare."³⁸ Taking cues from Paola Trivero, she then categorizes Alfierian heroines as mothers, wives, and stepmothers. While both Trivero's and Nay's studies, in particular, greatly expand the discursive space allotted to Alfierian women, their insistence on typological distinctions sharply limits the number of heroines capable of being

³⁶ See Stephanie Laggini Fiore, *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

³⁷ Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite*, 61.

³⁸ Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 10.

examined according to their chosen methodology. For example, mothers such as Clitennestra and Merope are carefully considered, but important Alfierian heroines who defy neat typological placement, such as Antigone and Mirra, fall outside the studies' analytical bounds. Building on the work of Nay and Trivero, this study attempts to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of Alfierian heroines.

Methodology.

Alfieri wrote extensively on his approach to tragedy. The *Vita*, his letters, his political treatises, the *Parere sulle tragedie*, and even the *Rime* contain numerous explicit references to and extended commentary on his tragic works. The *Vita*, moreover, is an account of the young aristocrat as a tragedian in the making. According to Bartolo Anglani,³⁹ it is a record of the “creazione e quasi l’invenzione di un autore tragico come personaggio di un’impresa impossibile.” For Anglani, this impossible undertaking is none other than the establishment of an Italian tragic theater in an age witness to the rise of bourgeois drama and the growing popularity of the modern novel.⁴⁰ Alfieri’s highly charged and personal depictions of his work as a tragedian make him an appealing subject for a study on tragedy, since he, of any other eighteenth-century Italian dramatist, provides the most intimate and developed account of his understanding of tragedy and attitude toward it. Yet despite Alfieri’s prolific commentary, he wrote relatively little about his overall approach to crafting tragic characters, preferring, instead, to reflect on the intersection of tragedy and self-identity and to defend the sociopolitical necessity of the genre in an epoch distracted, according to him, by other literary forms and debilitated by Enlightened absolutist regimes. As such, Alfieri’s own comments on his heroines are scarce and often obscured by his penchant for severe self-

³⁹ Bartolo Anglani, *L’altro io. Alfieri: Autobiografia e identità* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2018), 42.

⁴⁰ Anglani, 42.

criticism. This has likely contributed to the lack of scholarship on Alfierian heroines, since the commentary that exists specifically pertaining to them is often negative and overly colored by Alfieri's self-doubt. Furthermore, Alfieri, especially in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, often reveals himself to be a less than accurate judge of his tragedies' own merits and, for that matter, those of his heroines. His condemnation of Clitennestra in his commentary on the tragedy *Agamennone*, for example, belies the dynamism and complexity of a character whom most scholars agree is the work's main protagonist. Additionally, Alfieri is swift to denigrate a tragedy such as *Rosmunda*, whose subject matter is medieval as opposed to classical, while a close analysis illuminates the tragedy's nuanced depiction of female tyranny, the only such depiction within Alfieri's entire tragic corpus.

Despite their limitations in an analysis of his tragic heroines, Alfieri's writings provide a critical counterpoint to this study's close textual readings of his tragedies. While they do not always neatly cohere with what is actually represented by the tragic action, they furnish insight into Alfieri's anxieties as a tragedian and highlight the points at which his tragedies come into conflict with his own aesthetic ideals and those of the age in which he wrote. In my close readings of Alfierian tragedy, I also draw on modern tragic theory to support my analyses and to demonstrate how Alfierian tragic theater relates to developments in the tragic genre. However, because this theory still often neglects the troubled status of the tragic heroine, I also rely on feminist theory, most notably the work of Julia Kristeva and Teresa de Lauretis, to help me to identify those key points where Alfierian heroines push back against the restrictions of the tragic genre and resist tragedy's attempts to inhibit their development into fully realized characters. Applied to tragedy, the studies of Kristeva and de Lauretis expose the vulnerability of female representation within a dramatic form that from its very beginning has engaged in a conflicted relationship with women

and the feminine. While classical tragedy did not exclude representations of womanhood from its production, it conspicuously denied women access to the stage and even to the theater. Classical tragedy, which offered male actors garbed as women in place of real female bodies and projected a universalizing vision of humanity starkly demarcated along gender lines, nonetheless imbued its representations of men and women with a great degree of ambiguity, as the studies of Nicole Loraux have shown.⁴¹ Simultaneously absent from and present within tragedy, the heroines of classical tragedy, according to feminist theory, are often transgressive figures, who pose a threat to the male hero and who must be overcome in order for tragedy's teleological vision of male heroism to achieve its necessary completion. And yet they are essential fonts of significance within tragedy, vital to the tragic plot and to its creation of the hero's identity, since the latter acquires value in its being measured against that which it is not, i.e. woman, or in what it can appropriate for its own ends, i.e. the feminine. For these reasons, feminist theory offers a window into the ambiguities and ambivalences characterizing Alfieri's depictions of female heroism.

While invested in exploring the complex sites of gender construction, feminist theory, too, offers a way to read the transgressive nature of Alfierian heroines in a more positive light, that is, as an opportunity for these heroines to claim a measure of agency and subjectivity in a generic form that contests their participation. De Lauretis argues that it is only by acknowledging gender differences and the construction of these differences by hegemonic discourses, which include tragic discourse, that women can be retrieved from oppressive textual narratives and situated in "new spaces of discourse" that allow for a more equitable appraisal of their representation.⁴² I

⁴¹ See Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman; The Experience of Tiresias: The Feminine and Greek Man; and Mothers in Mourning*.

⁴² De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 25.

therefore utilize feminist theory to demonstrate how Alfieri's depictions of heroism and tyranny are gendered and to argue that only an analysis of these gender differences permits Alfierian heroines to be understood in their full complexity and in accurate relation to the male heroes and tyrants to whom they are juxtaposed.

Because, as de Lauretis points out, representations of gender are historical as well as ideological constructions,⁴³ I analyze Alfierian heroines taking into consideration the eighteenth-century Italian debates on tragedy which informed their depiction. To that end, the study's chapters are organized thematically according to key loci of transformation in the development of Italian tragedy in this period that directly implicate the representation of tragic womanhood in Alfierian theater. These loci are the role of fate in the tragic action, the model of tragic motherhood inherited from Scipione Maffei, and the representation of female amorous desire. All three loci reappear multiple times throughout Alfierian tragedies and came into focus through my close textual readings.

In chapter 1, "Silencing the Tragic Heroine: Fate and Female Subjectivity," I read four Alfierian heroines through the nexus of fate and silence. In the eighteenth century, Italian intellectuals held the concept of divine fate to be an archaic holdover from classical tragedy and incompatible with Christianity, as Enrico Mattioda has shown.⁴⁴ Silence, for its part, has been read by scholars of classical tragedy as a recurrent motif in ancient Greek tragedies and closely associated with the concept of fate. Characters who are silent often find themselves in conflict with fate, since this silence, imposed by divine forces, is believed to be within their control and yet is

⁴³ See, in particular, de Lauretis's chapter "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender*, 1-30.

⁴⁴ See Mattioda's chapter "Lieto fine," in *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento*, 199-248.

eventually ruptured despite themselves, leading to their ruin. As scholars such as Silvia Montiglio have made clear, it was most often heroines who were silent in classical drama.⁴⁵

Alfieri restores the concept of fate to his tragedies, yet it exists in tension with his interest in questions related to personal agency and the human mind, both of which bring his tragic theater within the orbit of emerging bourgeois drama. I argue that the four Alfierian heroines under examination utilize silence as a means through which to assert agency over the forces of fate seemingly governing the tragic action. In their contest with fate, Alfierian heroines, who, unlike Alfierian heroes, are often portrayed as struggling to maintain silence, exhibit a psychological complexity unique to them as heroines and thus acquire a subjectivity that has no equivalent in Alfieri's representation of male heroes. It is this subjectivity which Alfieri ultimately privileges over fate and which leads to his deep inquiry into his heroines' psyches over the course of the tragic action.

The first tragedy I consider is *Antigone*. In "*Antigone and the Conflict between Tragic Silence and Heroic Discourse*," I explore Alfieri's juxtaposition of Antigone's vocal contest with the tyrant, Creonte, and her suppressed love for her cousin—and Creonte's son—Emone. Because Antigone couches this love in silence, I pay particular attention to the ways in which her illicit love for Emone constitutes resistance to her *amor mortis* and demands, contradictorily, that she delineate more clearly, and vocally, the parameters of her heroism in order to bring about the death she has long sought and for which she is destined as Edipo's daughter. As I argue, despite her death at the end of the tragedy, an irresolvable psychic conflict emerges from Antigone's competing desires, whose antinomies are expressed through the tragedy's strategic oscillation between silence and heroic discourse.

⁴⁵ See Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

In the second section of the chapter, entitled “Across the Spectrum of Silence: From Villainy to Heroism,” I chart Alfieri’s use of silence in two female figures who pursue contrasting trajectories in their respective tragedies. Because of her complexity and her prominent appearance in both *Agamennone* and *Oreste*, Clitennestra will be included in this study’s first three chapters. In *Agamennone*, her growing bewilderment and psychic disorientation as a result of her clandestine love for Egisto lead her to commit the act of mariticide. This first analysis of Clitennestra traces the sporadic moments of lucidity, conveyed through the alternation of silence and speech, through which she evinces her understanding of her position within the dimensions of the tragedy and resists Egisto’s attempts at manipulation. While Clitennestra turns villainous, it is Sofonisba in the eponymous tragedy who becomes heroic through her open rejection of her secret love for Massinissa. Her heroism is achieved through the subordination of her silent love for the Numidian king to her political and patriotic principles, which link her fate to that of the conquered Carthage. Although Sofonisba rejects silence and its promise of amorous fulfillment, she, like Clitennestra, even if to a lesser extent, remains subject to a degree of psychic unrest and irresolution. However, in this tragic diptych, I demonstrate how it is through silence and passions unable to be granted full expression that Alfieri augments the psychic richness of his tragic women and posits their resistance to fate.

Finally, I conclude the chapter by examining *Mirra*, Alfieri’s epitomical representation of silence. In “Embedding and Enacting Tragic Silence in *Mirra*,” I attempt to build off previous criticism on *Mirra*’s silence by looking at how silence becomes a principal component of the work’s tragic scaffolding. To do so, I explore how the tragedy’s other characters unwittingly adopt a silence of their own and participate in, and even generate, the tragic paradox by which *Mirra* is condemned both for her reticence and confession. Critical to my discussion of *Mirra* is an analysis

of the discursive strategies that Alfieri employs to achieve the blurring of silence and speech throughout the tragedy. Nonetheless, I pay close attention to Mirra's tragic cognizance, as she alone of the tragedy's characters remains fully aware of the paradox by which her confession of her incestuous desire is guaranteed no matter the means by which she attempts to suppress it. It is in Mirra's crystalline awareness of the tragic absurdities surrounding her, and of which her loved ones are left ignorant, that I locate the heroine's resistance to the divine forces ostensibly guiding the tragic action.

In chapter 2, "Sacrificial Bodies: Maternity and Death," I examine how the maternal body is represented in Alfierian tragedy and how Alfieri updates the model of maternity inherited from Scipione Maffei, whose *Merope* (1713) offered the most influential depiction of tragic maternity in both Italy and France in the eighteenth century. Maffei's *Merope* is singularly devoted to her son, Egisto, and prepares to sacrifice herself on his behalf, yet she is a transgressive mother, since in her ignorance of Egisto's true identity she earlier tried to slay him. I argue that Alfieri far surpasses Maffei in proposing the maternal body as a site of multiple contradictions. Within his tragedies, the mother is at once grotesque and sacred, murderous and mournful. However, her body is always associated with death. Utilizing the work of Nicole Loraux and Julia Kristeva, I argue that Alfieri depicts the tragic mother in conflict with her hero-son, with this conflict emerging from the former's refusal to submit to the tragic logic that demands that she sacrifice herself on behalf of the latter. In her effort to exercise an autonomy not granted her by her maternal role, the tragic mother becomes an ambivalent figure, a contradictory presence within the tragic action whose conflict with her hero-son ultimately goes unresolved.

In "Non sono io madre pari all'altre": Giocasta and the Transgression of Maternity," I demonstrate how Giocasta is simultaneously a peripheral and central figure within the tragic action

of *Polinice* by way of her maternity. Acknowledged as a “vera madre” by Alfieri,⁴⁶ in her impartiality toward her warring sons Giocasta precipitates the tragedy’s fatal turn of events even as she attempts to atone for her earlier crime of incest. Her efforts to resolve the animosity between Eteocle and Polinice are repeatedly thwarted, as Alfieri presents the sacrifice required of the maternal body as a failure. However, caught between opposing ideas of motherhood—one benevolent, the other repulsive—Giocasta holds little sway in the tragic conflict between her sons, yet the tragedy is animated by her contradictions and evocatively concludes with her suicide rather than with the death of Polinice, the hero.

I next return to the figure of Clitennestra in “Competing Sacrifices: Clitennestra as Mother and Lover.” One of Alfieri’s most complex heroines, Clitennestra reappears in *Oreste* unable to reconcile her identity as mother with her new identity as lover and wife to Egisto. I argue that the tragedy is animated by this clash of identities that sees Clitennestra portrayed as the most reviled of Alfierian tragic mothers. Although the heroine seeks to repudiate her status as mother by sacrificing herself on behalf of the tyrant as opposed to her son, as is expected, Clitennestra remains by the tragedy’s end inescapably mother. Her death at Oreste’s hands is an act of horror precisely because, despite the ambivalences embedded in her representation, Clitennestra is first and foremost for Alfieri a maternal figure.

Lastly, in “Merope and the Maternal Ideal,” I analyze how Alfieri directly recuperates the maternal figure inherited from Maffei. I read the former’s *Merope* as a manifestation not only of his sense of competition with the lauded Maffei but of his anxieties regarding the tragic mother. Alfieri’s Merope is an idealized figure, who displays a purity which differentiates her from the two tragic mothers who precede her. Nonetheless, hers is still an ambivalent representation, since she

⁴⁶ Vittorio Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie e altre prose critiche*, ed. Morena Pagliai (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1978), 88.

attempts to slay Egisto, prior to his reveal, with a ferocity that is one of Alfieri's particular innovations brought to the figure. Furthermore, in the dichotomy that Alfieri establishes in the tragedy between maternal sensibility and paternal reason, Merope retreats from the tragic action following her long-lost son Egisto's ascension to the throne and selection of his foster-father, Polidoro, as his minister and guide. I therefore read Merope's swoon of joy and the physical removal of her unconscious body from the stage at the tragedy's conclusion as the singular instance in Alfierian tragic theater in which the mother successfully sacrifices herself on behalf of her son. The chapter closes by reflecting on the cost of this sacrifice and its implications with regard to the Alfierian tragic mother's capacity to exercise autonomy within the tragic action.

In chapter 3, "Unfaithful Heroines: Infidelity as Renegotiation and Resistance," I analyze the ways in which Alfieri depicts amorous desire in his representation of his heroines and stakes a claim in the longstanding eighteenth-century polemic concerning the role of love in Italian tragedy. Building a framework of amorous desire that takes structural cues from the work of feminist theorists Teresa de Lauretis and Linda Kintz, I read amorous desire as a contested channel of female agency as well as a central thematic in Alfierian tragic production. The Alfierian heroine who desires is a threatening presence within the tragic action and faces resistance in the form of male characters, who revile and repudiate her and attempt to circumscribe her agency. Alfieri explores the ambivalences and paradoxes embedded in female amorous desire often through the recurring conceit of infidelity. Although the heroines under examination in this chapter are not the only Alfierian heroines who love or desire, their shared charge of infidelity posits amorous desire as a transgressive force which enables them to claim a measure of agency for themselves and renegotiate their position within the tragic action in relation to the tragedies' male figures. Lastly, the charge of infidelity also reveals, metaphorically, how the tragic genre itself brings to bear on

depictions of female amorous desire and how desiring heroines resist, or are unfaithful to, its constraints.

In the chapter's first section, entitled "Reconsidering Love and Passivity," I argue that it is through the exercise of amorous desire that both Isabella and Ottavia, typically considered passive figures, vindicate a measure of agency and effect a resistance to the tyranny that oppresses them. In *Filippo*, Isabella resists the tyrant's cruelty both through her open declaration of her love for Carlo, his son, and her subsequent suicide. While it has been argued that the tragedy seems static due to the preponderating and inexorable tyranny of Filippo, I instead demonstrate how Isabella injects movement into the tragic action through the epistemological journey she undertakes. Unlike Carlo, who is already apprised of Filippo's capacity for cruelty and passively accepts it, Isabella gradually comes into knowledge of this tyranny. By the tragedy's end, she rejects her formerly passive role as consort and commits suicide in defiance of Filippo, who intended to keep her alive as punishment following Carlo's death. Notwithstanding Isabella's positive vindication of agency at the work's conclusion, I show that *Filippo* reflects Alfieri's anxiety over the role of love in Italian tragic theater through his own expressed dissatisfaction over the tragedy's "coldness."

This ambivalence carries over to Alfieri's portrayal of Ottavia in the eponymous tragedy. Although she is depicted as virtuous, Ottavia's complexities are revealed in her toleration of Nerone's abuse and willing assumption of a passive role within the tragic action. I argue that her love for the tyrant reveals Alfieri's interest in the ways in which amorous desire abuts with tyranny. In seeking to distance himself from the insipid love plots of French tragedy, Alfieri represents amorous desire as a potentially irrational and destructive force. Despite being a passive figure within the tragedy, Ottavia still manages to realize a certain agency not only through her suicide in defiance of Nerone's political objectives, but through the very strength of her desire for the

tyrant himself, since her desire, by opposing his will, only increases his hatred of her. However, this analysis of Ottavia argues that Alfieri's difficulty in depicting a passive heroine who desires the tyrant, is evidenced in the tragedy's inconstant focus on Ottavia: she only appears in three acts. Furthermore, her passivity did not go unnoticed by critics. The poet and translator, Melchiorre Cesarotti, objected to what he considered to be the heroine's illogical passion for Nerone despite his abuse and false accusations of infidelity. For Alfieri, this was precisely the point. This section therefore concludes with an analysis of how Alfieri strives to recuperate the contradictory figure of Ottavia and utilize her passivity as the motor of the tragic action.

In "Love, Villainy, and Punishment," I deepen the connection Alfieri draws between amorous desire and tyranny in *Ottavia* through an examination of Clitennestra and Rosmunda, two heroines who are villainized as a result of their amorous desire. In this second section of the chapter, I conclude this study's look at Clitennestra by analyzing how the tragedies *Agamennone* and *Oreste* portray the heroine's amorous desire and eventually punish her for it. Manipulated by Egisto and driven to murder her husband in the former tragedy because of an uncontrollable passion, Clitennestra is subjected to her new consort's mistreatment and offspring's revilement of her in the latter. Additionally, both tragedies further punish her through their construction of a double infidelity: unfaithful to her first husband, Clitennestra must then confront her new husband's lack of affection for her. However, it is in the moments in both tragedies in which she struggles with her desire for Egisto that she manages to act with a measure of autonomy and resist serving merely as an instrument of the latter's vendetta against Agamennone's house. This analysis, therefore, pays attention to the ways in which Clitennestra's amorous desire intersects with the other desires developed by the two tragedies: Egisto's and Oreste's desire for vengeance in *Agamennone* and *Oreste*, respectively. I argue that both works, rather than marginalize the role

of love, are transformed into tragedies of desire. Their tragic action is inscribed within a language of (narrative) desire that takes the form of oaths and vows. While Clitennestra comes to be punished for her amorous desire, particularly in *Oreste*, this desire is the only one among those developed within the two tragedies which comes nearest to complete satisfaction.

The chapter closes with an examination of Rosmunda, Alfieri's most villainous heroine. I argue that Rosmunda exercises the most power of all Alfierian heroines but differentiates herself from the typical Alfierian male tyrant through her amorous desire. This analysis thus looks at how tyranny comes to be gendered in Alfierian tragedy and how Rosmunda both attains and relinquishes agency through her amorous desire. While she utilizes her desire to renegotiate the terms of her untenable marriage to the cruel Alboino, her power, in fact, is later undermined by her excessive desire for Almachilde, who repudiates her due to his love for Romilda. Just like Clitennestra, Rosmunda, then, suffers a double infidelity in the form of her second husband's passion for her stepdaughter. As a result, her amorous desire for Almachilde transforms into a pure desire for vengeance by the tragedy's end. This analysis concludes by demonstrating, as in the previous analysis, how the heroine's desire intersects with that of the hero, that is, Almachilde, who looks both to atone for the murder of Alboino and realize his passion for Romilda. This engenders an unmistakable ambivalence that culminates in the tragedy's singular ending: the duel between Rosmunda and Almachilde, in which they are evenly matched and resolved to fight to the death.

In chapter 4, "Transcending Tragedy: Louise Stolberg-Gedern and Alceste," I conclude this study with an examination of two of Alfieri's less frequently analyzed female figures in order to demonstrate how the depictions of Louise Stolberg-Gedern and Alceste challenge the previously established Alfierian models of female heroism. This chapter therefore looks at how themes largely

antithetical to Alfierian tragic theater, such as domestic harmony and conjugal fidelity, play out in Alfieri's representations of his life companion and his final tragic heroine. The chapter sets at its overall goal a more nuanced understanding of how Alfieri's tragic theater dialogues with his other writings, in particular the *Vita* and *Rime*, through its strategic depiction of female figures. In so doing, it seeks to shed light both on the importance of Louise within Alfieri's writings, an importance often overlooked in Alfierian criticism, and on the relationship of his final tragedy, *Alceste seconda*, to his overall tragic production.

In "The Tragic and Untragic in the Literary Depiction(s) of Louise Stolberg, Countess of Albany," I analyze Louise Stolberg-Gedern's recurring and dynamic presence in the *Vita* and *Rime* and posit that she is the central female protagonist of both works. I first examine how Alfieri strategically positions the countess within the autobiography so that their meeting and subsequent relationship are made to conform with the work's overall project of charting his literary conversion and development as a tragedian. To this end, I also identify the points at which Alfieri adds an element of tragedy to his depiction of Louise through his borrowing of language from his political treatises in order to portray Louise's marriage with Charles Edward Stuart, the Jacobite pretender to the throne of Great Britain, as a tyranny. In so doing, Alfieri touches on themes recurrent in his tragic theater. I then trace the shifting depiction of the countess in the *Rime* where Louise's portrayal undergoes a transformation as Alfieri moves beyond simply idealizing her in Petrarchan language in order to reveal their emotional and intellectual complementarity and then, later, to express his fear of outliving her. I argue that Alfieri's lyrical portrait of the countess corresponds to her analogue portrait in the *Vita* and therefore represents his deep interest in domestic tranquility and companionship, themes which will resonate in *Alceste seconda* and which run contrary to the traditional image of the author as solitary, tempestuous, and prone to melancholy. Thus, Louise

must be recognized not simply as a means, as has been suggested,⁴⁷ by which Alfieri interiorizes his passions and deepens his self-knowledge; rather, she stands, albeit in an unavoidably idealized form, as the most visible expression of domestic themes which will play out in *Alceste seconda* but which have been cultivated years earlier, both in the *Vita* and *Rime*.

In “Alceste: A New Model of Female Heroism,” the chapter concludes with an examination of Alfieri’s last tragic heroine, Alceste, who differs notably in various ways from the tragic women who have come before her. Because Alfieri devotes considerable space to the tragedy in the *Vita* and other writings, clearly indicating his personal appreciation for a work which has come to receive mixed and generally insufficient critical notice, this section pays close attention to the ways in which *Alceste seconda* demonstrates both a continuity with his earlier tragic production and a break from it. This analysis argues that in rewriting Euripides after his ten-year hiatus Alfieri adds to his tragic theater themes such as domestic bliss and conjugal fidelity, which have already been explored in his literary representation of the Countess of Albany. Unlike previous tragedies, *Alceste seconda* does not ostensibly delimit or trouble the heroine’s presence within the tragic action, along with the thematics of love and maternity which she often embodies but, instead, vindicates it through Admético’s desperate efforts to reunite with his wife in death. Alfieri’s portrayal of Alceste is more serene and idealized than his previous depictions of tragic heroines, since he refrains from imbuing his final heroine with the psychological complexity found in his other tragic women so that through her he can eulogize domestic companionship, conjugal love, and life itself. Therefore, while *Alceste seconda* relates to previous Alfierian tragedies in its interest in the domestic dimensions of what Bartolo Anglani, among others, identifies as bourgeois

⁴⁷ See Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, particularly the chapter “Il problema critico delle ‘Rime’,” 165-178.

drama,⁴⁸ the tragedy conforms to certain neoclassical conventions in its idealized depiction of its heroine, who lacks psychic nuance, and in its push for a happy, non-fatal ending, the only such ending in Alfierian tragedy. As a result, this study's look at *Alceste seconda* serves as a counterpoint to its previous analyses.

Alfierian heroines have traditionally been studied individually or grouped according to narrow typological categories. Through its juxtaposition of tragedies rarely considered together, and through its close textual readings of still other tragedies less often given their critical due, this study aims to propose a new approach through which to analyze Alfierian heroines. It is a holistic approach, informed by historical context and tragic theory, that fully takes into consideration these heroines' complexities and contradictions as well as the ways in which they exist in dialogue with each other. In so doing, this study endeavors to demonstrate the vast potential for further illuminating analyses of these remarkable women

⁴⁸ See Bartolo Anglani, *La tragedia impossibile: Alfieri e la profanazione del tragico* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2018); and Franco Fido's earlier and highly useful analysis "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato: Un dilemma settecentesco dagli aristotelici al Foscolo," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate*, 11-40.

Chapter 1

Silencing the Tragic Heroine: Fate and Female Subjectivity

I.1. *Antigone* and the Conflict between Tragic Silence and Heroic Discourse

In Alfierian tragedy it is most often female characters who are silent or who struggle to maintain a certain silence. While Alfierian heroes tend to express their outrage at tyrannical abuses of power, Alfierian heroines, instead, regularly interiorize the passions that move them, attempting to conceal illicit desires or otherwise unspeakable anguish behind a veil of silence. Although not referring to his tragic theater's recurrent use of silence specifically, Vittorio Alfieri addresses his characters' tendency to voice their passions through soliloquies, one of the ways in which silence can be rendered audible on the tragic stage, since characters give vent to turmoil otherwise kept hidden when in the company of others. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, his personal commentary of his tragedies which first appeared in 1789 alongside his other works printed at Kehl, Alfieri justifies his frequent recourse to soliloquies by writing that the most passionate of people, himself included, often speak aloud to themselves or in their minds. Referring to tragedy, he adds: "Quanto più dunque potrà una tal cosa accadere a chi da una terribile e continua passione sia mosso?"¹ Alfieri thus implicitly addresses one of the principal impulses of his tragic theater: its alternation between public and private discourses, between the agonies of passion kept concealed from other characters and the irruption of this passion in speech, often in the form of soliloquies.

The distinct relationship between tragedy and silence has already been addressed in scholarship on classical tragedy.² Silvia Montiglio has studied the proliferation of silence and its permutations in ancient Greek tragedies, writing that silence comes to bear on the tragic action

¹ Vittorio Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie e altre prose critiche*, ed. Morena Pagliai (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1978), 152.

² For two studies focusing on women's silence and speech in classical drama and literature, see Laura McClure, *Spoken like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and André Lardinois and Laura McClure, eds., *Making Silence Speak. Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

since “characters often deem their silences responsible for the outcome of the plot.”³ However, this silence is often brought into tension with the notion of divine fate, which either imposes silence on tragic figures or prevents silence from thwarting otherwise fated events. As Montiglio asserts, silent characters cannot maintain their silences indefinitely, because “the dramatic development leads from impossible silences to unavoidable words: it ends in the failure of silence.”⁴ But when this silence is breached, it does not necessarily lead to comprehension on the part of the tragedy’s other characters. Arguing that classical tragic theater serves as a terrain of deliberate ambiguities and contradictions, Jean-Pierre Vernant writes that the function of words between characters in tragedy is “to indicate the blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds, to locate the points of conflict.”⁵ One such point of conflict for tragic man is his position between the “two opposed poles” of “self” and the “divine at work.”⁶

Alfieriian tragic theater transposes the conflict emerging from the interplay of silence and discourse into a late eighteenth-century context. This conflict comes to be most closely investigated in his representation of tragic heroines and intimately concerns the notion of fate. Franco Fido argues that eighteenth-century Italian tragedy was characterized by the absence of fate, which in ancient Greek tragedy justified the hero’s suffering, and by growing skepticism toward Aristotelian precepts, originally seen as the pillars of the tragic genre. There was, however, a contingent of tragedians, such as Giuseppe Salvi and Domenico Lazzarini, who earlier in the

³ Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 194.

⁴ Montiglio, 204.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy,” in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 42.

⁶ Vernant, “Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,” in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 75.

century attempted to revive Greek tragedy, but their tragedies were often excessively violent and unsuited for the eighteenth-century stage with its moralistic sensibilities. Other tragedians, Scipione Maffei and Pier Jacopo Martello, for instance, sought to write tragedies that compensated for the lack of destiny by adopting political themes that upheld ancient Rome as a model or by employing a happy ending, both of which served to make the hero's suffering during the tragic action justifiable.⁷ Although Enrico Mattioda insists that Alfieri strove to restore the function of destiny within the tragic action, seen by many eighteenth-century Italian theoreticians of tragedy as incompatible with Christian thought,⁸ fate occupies a contested position within Alfierian theater. It becomes a force against which his characters often resist, and, in the case of his heroines, notably through their imperfect maintenance of silence. As Laura McClure proposes in her evaluation of the function of women's silence in classical Greece, "even women's silence may denote a form of resistance rather than passive submission."⁹ This analysis therefore looks at the ways in which Alfieri's utilization of silence in his tragedies engages questions concerning female agency and subjectivity and the role of fate in the tragic action, questions that often clash and lead to contradictions when examined in parallel. As will be seen, silence becomes a means through which Alfieri represents his interest in the psychological makeup of his tragic heroines as well as his tragedies' concern for more domestic, less sublime conflicts typical of emerging bourgeois drama, in which fate has a diminished function.¹⁰

⁷ Franco Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato: Un dilemma settecentesco dagli aristotelici al Foscolo," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate: Il divenire dei generi letterari fra Sette e Ottocento* (Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1989), 11-18.

⁸ Enrico Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1994), 177-186.

⁹ Laura McClure, "Introduction," in *Making Silence Speak*, 11.

¹⁰ Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate*, 18-32; Bartolo Anglani, *La tragedia impossibile: Alfieri e la profanazione del tragico* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2018), 175.

Silence emerges as a constitutive element of the tragic action in *Antigone*, Alfieri's third acknowledged tragedy after *Filippo* and *Polinice*. Nonetheless, the silence that features in *Antigone* exists in tension with the drama's insistence on heroic discourse and its adoption of a classical conception of fate that is in keeping with the mythical subject matter. Largely inspired by Statius' *Thebaid*, but also influenced by seventeenth-century French treatments of the myth, Alfieri first versified the tragedy in 1777 before returning to the work in 1781.¹¹ *Antigone* represented a critical stage in Alfieri's development as a tragedian, since with this tragedy he sought for the first time to introduce only those characters who would be integral to the plot.¹²

The relationship Alfieri develops between fate and silence in *Antigone* becomes immediately apparent. In Act I, Argia tries to share Antigone's fate by assuming the punishment Creonte will impose on those who perform funerary rites for the recently slain Polinice, whose body he has left ignominiously exposed outside the walls of Thebes. While Argia tries to provide justification for why she should also perform the funerary rites, Antigone looks to silence her. To do this, she contends that Argia, her brother's wife, bears an obligation to her living family members, not least of whom a son, which prevents her from taking part in Antigone's efforts to forestall the continuance of an inherited legacy of incest and fratricide. In short, not related by blood to Edipo, Argia has no place in the contest of wills that will soon take place between

¹¹ On the possible French sources for Alfieri's tragedy, which include Jean Rotrou's *Antigone* (1638) and Pierre Brumoy's *Le Théâtre des Grecs* (1730), see Vincenza Perdichizzi, "Lettura dell'*Antigone*," in *Testi e avantesti alfieriani* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2018), 76-88.

¹² Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 90. "In questa composizione mi nasceva per la prima volta il pensiero di non introdurre che i soli personaggi indispensabili, e importanti all'azione, sgombrandola d'ogni cosa non necessaria a dirsi, ancorchè contribuisse pure all'effetto" (Alfieri, 90).

Antigone and the tyrant,¹³ whose cruel law prohibiting funerary rites for the former ruler of Thebes has been solely designed to ensnare just Antigone herself. Despite Antigone's attempts to silence Argia, what ensues in the third scene of the first act is a passionate exchange between the two women that is marked by well-reasoned arguments *pro* and *contra* their shared involvement in Polinice's funeral. At one point, Antigone boldly declares the "santa impresa"¹⁴ to which she alone is impelled:

A santa impresa vassi;
Ma vassi a morte: io 'l deggio, e morir voglio:
Nulla ho che il padre al mondo, ei mi vien tolto;
Morte aspetto, e la bramo.

(I, 3, vv. 187-190)

Not to be outdone by Polinice's forthright sister, Argia immediately insists in the same scene that her conjugal ties to Polinice link her more closely to the sacred endeavor:

Perir non deggio? Oh! che di' tu? vuoi forse
Nel dolor vincer me? Pari in amarlo
Noi fummo; pari; o maggior io. Di moglie
Altro è l'amor, che di sorella.

(vv. 196-199)

In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes that Argia is singularly "mossa dall'amore del morto ed insepolto marito."¹⁵ As a wife and now widow, Argia insists that her sorrow ultimately finds no equivalent in the grief experienced by a sister and is therefore all the greater. But

¹³ Cf. Vernant, "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 49-84. Jean-Pierre Vernant would argue that the idea of a tragic will is a modern development hardly consonant with an ancient Greek understanding of tragedy.

¹⁴ Vincenza Perdichizzi asserts that this "santa impresa" becomes sacred not from any "superiore norma divina" but, rather, from the two women's "investimento affettivo" in their efforts to bury Polinice and from the strength of their "legame naturale" (Perdichizzi, "Lettura dell'*Antigone*," in *Testi e avantesti*, 83).

¹⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 91.

Antigone's destiny has been forecast prior to her birth in the oracle that foretold that her father, Edipo, would murder his own father and marry his mother. As such, Antigone refuses to give pride of place to the rights of the domestic sphere from which she has been excluded. In the dialogue between Argia and Antigone, Alfieri thus juxtaposes to a classical understanding of fate the more modern notion of familial affections.¹⁶ In order to counter Argia, Antigone retraces the crimes of her bloodline:

Argia,
 Teco non voglio io gareggiar di amore;
 Di morte, sì. Vedova sei; qual sposo
 Perdesti, il so: ma tu, figlia non nasci
 D'incesto; ancor la madre tua respira;
 Esul non hai, non cieco, non mendico,
 Non colpevole, il padre: il ciel più mite
 Fratelli a te non diè, che l'un dell'altro
 Nel sangue a gara si bagnasser empj.
 Deh! non ti offender, s'io morir vo' sola;
 Io, di morir, pria che nascessi, degna.

(I, 3, vv. 199-209)

Having openly declared her incestuous origins and the bloody familial crimes derived from them, Antigone presents herself as the superior candidate to defy Creonte's prohibition. Yet Argia refuses to be silenced. Alfieri predicates the entire scene on the tension between speech and speechlessness, between Antigone's and Argia's competing desire for a voice in a tragic space which only allows for one to challenge Creonte and therefore must necessarily silence the other.¹⁷ This tension emerging between verbal discourse and silence goes unresolved throughout the tragedy. However, in its irresolution, Alfieri locates a source of tragic doubt and anguish that

¹⁶ Perdichizzi, "Lettura dell'*Antigone*," in *Testi e avantesti*, 82-83.

¹⁷ Argia does not appear in the Sophoclean version of the Antigone myth. Instead, she can be found in Statius' *Thebaid* and is prominently featured in Jean Rotrou's *Antigone* (1638). See Nicola Impallomeni, *L'Antigone di Vittorio Alfieri* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni Editore, 1899).

complicates Antigone's acceptance of her death as well as the function that fate plays in the tragic action.

While both Argia and Antigone engage in a competition of love and desire for death, it is only Antigone whose desire for death transforms into *amor mortis*, or what Guido Santato has described as a desire fueled by more than hatred, rather by "disprezzo, sdegno magnanimo contro la violenza tirannica."¹⁸ In addition, it is true that Argia, unlike Antigone, does not seek to wrest the right to perform the required funerary rites for Polinice from the other woman but, instead, to be allowed to perform them alongside Antigone herself. Earlier, Argia had posed the evocative question: "Chi teco, / chi, se non io, potea divider l'opra?" (I, 3, vv. 178-179). Her refusal to capitulate to Antigone reinforces the substratum of tension between verbal discourse and silence that underlies the entire tragedy. This substratum exists beneath the more easily evinced conflict between fully realized heroism, which will conclude in Antigone's death, and political tyranny, which is represented by Creonte, whom Antigone will soon confront. This conflict has been a common focus of many scholars.¹⁹ According to them, Antigone differentiates herself from Argia in seeking to meet death in full defiance of Creonte's prohibition, since she is driven both by a deep and adamant hatred of the tyrant and the desire to put an end to the crimes of her bloodline, while Argia, who firmly adheres to her identity as loving wife to Polinice, is motivated by less

¹⁸ Guido Santato, *Tra mito e palinodia: Itinerari alfieriani* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1999), 284. For another reading of Antigone's *amor mortis*, this time in relation to Alfieri's concealed affinity for his tyrants, see Franco Ferrucci, "Il silenzio di Mirra," in *Addio al Parnaso* (Milan: Bompiani, 1971), 27-50.

¹⁹ Raffaello Ramat writes that the originality of Antigone's character lies in her unequivocal awareness of her own heroism when squaring off against the tyrant: "Ma la fanciulla tebana è originalissima perchè è la prima grande persona alfieriana che abbia piena coscienza del proprio eroismo," *Alfieri: Tragico lirico* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1958), 53. Ramat offers a reading of a vocal, victorious Antigone, who declares her "odio" for Creonte "quasi trionfalmente cantando" (Ramat, 54).

lofty sentiments, that is, in the words of Raffaello Ramat, by “affetti puramente umani”²⁰ as opposed to sublime. Yet in Argia’s refusal to concede defeat to Antigone, Alfieri strengthens the tragedy’s dichotomy between heroic discourse and silence. In other words, and notwithstanding the difference in motivating factors that distinguish Antigone from Argia,²¹ Argia strives to present herself as a heroic contender alongside Antigone. Furthermore, her rejection of Antigone’s attempts to silence her, to leave her without a convincing rejoinder needed to advance the contest between them, requires that Antigone vocalize ever more emphatically and articulately her heroism.²² In performing the funerary rites demanded of Polinice’s slain and desecrated body, Antigone realizes the sororal piety owed her brother and guarantees for herself the death that will result in the disruption of her incestuous bloodline. However, in her identification with her conjugal role, which, as Stephanie Laggini Fuore has argued, is meant to preserve the family unit,²³ Argia does not serve as a neat foil to Antigone with her preternatural heroism. Instead, by repeatedly articulating her desire for a shared role in Polinice’s funerary rites and the resulting death alongside Antigone, Argia undermines Antigone’s heroic reasoning and represents the intrusion of more domestic human sentiments in what Jean-Pierre Vernant describes as “that border zone where human actions are hinged together with divine powers.”²⁴ Mario Trovato has

²⁰ Ramat, 54.

²¹ Angelo Fabrizio, *Rileggere Alfieri* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2014), 236.

²² Mario Fubini, instead, contends that Argia plays a subsidiary role in Antigone’s heroism. Polinice’s wife echoes this heroism in her speech but does not add significantly to it: “Ma Argia, per quanto così evidente sia la poesia in tutte le parole che essa pronuncia, non è se non una nota complementare della più complesso poesia, che informa la figura d’Antigone,” *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni Editore, 1953), 123.

²³ Stephanie Laggini Fiore, *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 44.

²⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy,” in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 47

read Antigone's unflagging *amor mortis* as the force by which the heroine will thwart the impure destiny of her bloodline, in whose sins she would be complicit were she to marry her cousin, Emone, as Creonte will later demand. This unretractable desire for death thus seemingly resolves the dialectic between reason and feeling that has ensnared her father, mother, and brothers before her.²⁵ But while Argia's own thanatotic aspirations are prompted by purer familial affections, they are nonetheless pulled to a certain extent within the orbit of Antigone's destiny. As wife of Polinice and mother to his son, Argia has ensured that the Oedipal bloodline Antigone seeks to terminate and purify will endure. In fact, Argia contents herself with the hope that in the care of her father, Adrasto, her son will grow up cultivating a desire for vengeance that will both mitigate and further justify her absence from the family. Thus, in refusing to submit to the silence that Antigone looks to impose on her, Argia only drives the heroine to give more substantial voice to the nature of the heroism compelling her to challenge Creonte's tyranny. The dialogue between Argia and Antigone, extended as it is, becomes an intermingling of heroic voices, each searching for the precise articulation that will grant one value over the other, and in this outvaluing guarantee satisfaction of just one set of heroic goals. Indeed, Mario Fubini argues that "senza Argia la tragedia di Antigone resterebbe muta."²⁶ Ultimately, it is Antigone who must triumph over Argia, as the latter woman is not fully implicated by the fate awaiting Edipo's descendants. In fact, Antigone declares to her sister-in-law that "il ciel te non confonda / colla stirpe d'Edippo!" (I, 3, vv. 242-243). But it is at Argia's urging, and as a result of her persistence in their verbal contest,²⁷

²⁵ Mario Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri: La natura del limite tragico* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1978), 61-63.

²⁶ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 125.

²⁷ Alfieri detested French tragedy's use of confidants to justify the protagonist's disclosure of any secrets. Indeed, Alfieri writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that "nelle presenti tragedie non vi si vedono mai personaggi messi in ascolto per penetrare gli altrui segreti, dallo scoprimento dei quali dipenda poi in gran

that Antigone is compelled to further reveal her limpid consciousness of her tragic fate.²⁸ She therefore questions Argia, accusingly: “E tormi / Tal gloria vuoi?” (I, 3, vv. 229-230). At this point in the tragic action, it is the clearest expression of her tragic cognizance.

In its typically Alfierian concision,²⁹ Antigone’s interrogative phrase reads with all the force of a bold declaration. Angelo Fabrizi has argued that *Antigone* is a tragedy essentially founded on the titanic contest between heroism and tyranny from which the eponymous heroine and Creonte derive both their identity and *raison d’être*. Such is the force of the contest that all other characters within the tragedy become ancillary to the coexistence of Antigone and the tyrant. Despite their antithetical nature, the characters’ contrasting passions (Antigone’s for justice and liberty, Creonte’s for limitless power) are equal in strength and heightened during the heroine’s confrontation with Creonte after the discovery of her transgression of the latter’s unjust law. Fabrizi writes that Alfieri’s main poetic interest in *Antigone* lies in this “contemplazione del disfrenarsi di gigantesche individualità legate indissolubilmente da contrasto morale.”³⁰ In other words, for Fabrizi, the mechanisms of the tragedy operate in the forceful and highly verbal conflict between Antigone and Creonte, in which each actor is determined to openly display his or her motivating passions, the potential of whose expression depends, symbiotically, on the presence of the other.³¹ With her pursuit of heroic glory, to which she has been destined as the daughter of

parte l’azione” (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 148). Thus, for Alfieri, Argia is not a character entirely subordinate to Antigone; she instead plays an important role in the tragic action. Between the two women there exists a tension that heightens the tragic atmosphere and is not normally permissible in the more passive exchanges between a confidant and the protagonist of a tragic work.

²⁸ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 53-54.

²⁹ For a useful study on Alfieri’s tragic style, see Vincenza Perdichizzi, *Lingua e stile nelle tragedie di Vittorio Alfieri* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2009).

³⁰ Fabrizi, *Rileggere Alfieri*, 239.

³¹ Fabrizi, 237-239.

Edipo, Antigone looks to counter Creonte's tyranny. Therefore, her acknowledgement to Argia of the glory she seeks through contest with Creonte gives weight to Fabrizi's interpretation of the tragedy as a titanic moral combat between heroine and tyrant, and further suggests the external nature of the tragedy in which Antigone desires renown and self-purification through the precise delineation of a heroism that must remain individual, possessed by her alone, and in which Argia cannot fully share.

Antigone's unflagging bent for discursive contest with Creonte, anticipated in her exchanges with Argia which open the tragedy, has often been noted.³² Scholars have thus put particular focus on the ways in which Antigone motivates her actions through an appreciation of the tragic forces that have irredeemably intruded on the private sphere in which she cultivates both her piety toward her nuclear relations and her sense of justice, which will see her endeavor to put a definitive end to the Oedipal bloodline. This appreciation is in at least one sense external because Edipo's crimes and Antigone's transgression of Creonte's law are openly acknowledged by both the heroine and tyrant, and thus constitute the general scaffolding of the tragedy by which Alfieri organizes the forces of heroism and tyranny operating within *Antigone* and makes them conform to the ideology espoused in such political projects as *Della tirannide* (1777), with which he was simultaneously occupied.³³ This same appreciation is also external for the very reason that it brooks no reconciliation with any of Antigone's private sentiments and anxieties, as will be seen over the course of the development of the amorous subplot between her and her cousin Emone,

³² Silence was typically considered a feminine attribute in ancient Greek drama; thus, Antigone is an exception in her adoption of masculine speech during her confrontation with Creonte. See Mark Griffith, "Antigone and Her Sister(s). Embodying Women in Greek Tragedy," in *Making Silence Speak*, 116-136.

³³ Stefania Buccini, "Lettura della *Virginia*," in *Alfieri tragico*, eds. Enrico Ghidetti and Roberta Turchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2004), 480-481.

who is also Creonte's son.³⁴ Because of the resoluteness with which Antigone accepts her fatal destiny and her irrepressible need to confront Creonte's tyranny, Ines Ceccoli has argued that Antigone suffers from a lack of contrast which denies her "umanità e freschezza" and leaves her a "figura troppo fredda pel dramma."³⁵ For Ceccoli, this confrontation makes evident the uneasy position of Antigone within the different tragic spheres constructed by the tragedy: on the one hand, the political sphere in which Creonte as dramatic representative of the paradigmatic Alfierian tyrant looms large³⁶; and on the other, the more intimate familial sphere in which Antigone satisfies her paternal and fraternal obligations as the last among Edipo's offspring. For Stephanie Laggini Fiore, Antigone is not a heroine characterized by silence; instead, "she is the voice of truth," who, through her uncompromising provocation of Creonte's tyranny, causes him to doubt his hold on the Theban throne.³⁷

³⁴ Lucio D'Abbicco, "L'*Antigone* di Vittorio Alfieri. Il valore dell'individualità alla prova del preromanticismo," in *Altrimenti il silenzio: appunti sulla scena al femminile*, eds. Alessandra Ghiglione and Pier Cesare Rivoltella (Milan: EuresisEdizioni, 1998), 77. Emphasized by Alfieri in his tragedy, this subplot was likely inspired by Rotrou's *Antigone* (D'Abbicco, 77).

³⁵ Ines Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1926), 45. Ceccoli objects to what she views as Alfieri's overemphasis on Antigone's death drive. She sees this death drive as motivated by a firm unwavering conscience but argues that it does not accord with Antigone's actual role within the tragedy as "eroina degli affetti familiari," who meets death out of an extreme sense of obligation to her ill-fated family and to the ultimate restoration of familial dignity (Ceccoli, 45).

³⁶ In an unpublished dissertation, Bertilia Herrera puts emphasis on the tragedy's external apparatus, that is, the politically-motivated confrontation between Antigone and Creonte. She writes that the heroine is the "first to embody Alfieri's hatred of tyranny, if only indirectly," "Racine, Alfieri, and Schiller: A Comparative Study of Heroines" (PhD diss., University of Riverside, 1977), 103. This is a common reading of Alfieri's tragedy. However, Herrera asserts that Antigone ends her life as a victim of patriarchal injustice. It is this focus on Antigone's victimhood that Nicoletta Tinozzi Mehrmand picks up, in another unpublished dissertation, writing that in *Antigone* predominates the "figura della vittima con una sensibilità tutta femminile, eppure forte e ricca di energia," "Virginia e la tragedia femminile nel teatro alfieriano" (PhD diss., University of California-Los Angeles, 1989), 121.

³⁷ Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 100. Fiore argues that Antigone is the "one who dares to speak while all others lack the necessary courage to do so" (Fiore, 100).

Both Ceccoli and Fiore have made it a point to give special attention to the understudied tragic women with which Alfierian tragedy is replete.³⁸ While tending to neglect the body of Alfierian women as a critical whole worthy of dedicated study, other scholars, too, have presented Antigone as a figure with a remarkably coherent awareness of her tragic fate and of the forces which impel her to accept it. Antigone thus comes to be seen as dominated by and most fully realized in her desire to discourse with tyranny and confront it. Although locating in Antigone the marked dichotomy between feminine “frailty” and “sensibility” and the more masculine vigor commonly associated with heroism, Walter Binni makes a persuasive case for the heroine’s complexities of character. He writes that Alfieri:

veniva anche approfondendo sempre piú il personaggio di Antigone, assicurandone l’eccezionale purezza e fermezza contro ogni possibile languore, rendendola sempre piú eroica e solitaria, bramosa di una morte liberatrice e purificatrice, ma insieme ricca di una vita affettiva delicata e intensa, di una consapevolezza della propria fragilità umana, piena di sfumature delicatissime che tolgono alla sua forza eroica ogni rigidità schematica e scolasticamente esemplare e la rendono viva e concreta, così come quella forza e quella solitudine di creatura superiore ed eccezionale assicurano una robustezza sentimentale e poetica, coerente e compatta ai moti piú soavi e delicati della sua *pietas* familiare, della sua virginale femminilità.³⁹

This lengthy citation from Binni characterizes the general criticism of Antigone, in whom many scholars locate a wracking and intensely suffered inner life that renders her heroism before Creonte

³⁸ With regard to other scholars of Alfierian heroines, neither Paola Trivero nor Laura Nay devote much, if any, space to Antigone in their respective panoramic analyses of Alfierian female characters. Both Trivero and Nay organize their studies around the feminine typologies of mother, lover, and mother-in-law, typologies which hardly correspond to the figure of Antigone herself. They thus further suggest the difficulties inherent in any study of Antigone, who appears somewhat atypical among the tragic patterns established by Alfieri’s other heroines, whose tragedies largely play out within the domestic sphere. Virginia’s death before the plebeians of ancient Rome is a notable exception. See Trivero, *Tragiche donne: Tipologie femminili nel teatro italiano del Settecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2000); and Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti. “Affetti naturali” e “affetti di libertà” nelle tragedie alfieriane*. (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2017).

³⁹ Walter Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 73.

all the more poetic and convincing. It is for Binni, as for other scholars, this subordination of her inner life to her public contest with Theban tyranny which distinguishes Antigone from Argia, who is motivated by private affections for her slain husband and does not suffer a similar and unshakeable imposition of tragic fate. Earlier, Mario Fubini had argued, along the lines of Binni, that it was through this subordination that Antigone acquired “una vita vera” as a figure “dotata di una forza sovrumana, eppure trepidante per una segreta debolezza.”⁴⁰ This secret weakness takes the form of Antigone’s feelings for Emone. Yet for Fubini, it is this secret weakness which constitutes the “motivo più profondo della tragedia”⁴¹ and which acquires new significance in Antigone’s painful realization that her love for her cousin must be sacrificed to her desire for death.⁴² Mario Trovato insists that one of the goals of Antigone’s rebellious confrontation with Creonte is the public denunciation of the tyrant.⁴³ For Trovato, however, Antigone’s subordination of her private affections and inner turmoil to her public desire for a death intended as atonement for the iniquities of her bloodline is nothing less than fraught. Trovato thus writes that by the tragedy’s end Antigone “raggiunge la definitiva e disperata consapevolezza dell’incompatibilità assoluta tra ideale e passione amorosa.”⁴⁴ For all the scholars indicated above, Antigone is a

⁴⁰ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 120-121.

⁴¹ Fubini, 121.

⁴² Cf. Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 55. Raffaello Ramat views this subordination of Antigone’s inner life to her public one in less than positive terms. He contends that “tutta la tragedia può dirsi uno sforzo di conciliare l’umano col sovrumano, il pietoso con la passione irrazionale” (Ramat, 55).

⁴³ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri*, 55. See also Folco Portinari, *Di Vittorio Alfieri e della tragedia* (Turin: G. Giappichelli Editore, 1976), 103. Portinari writes that the “consistenza dell’orrore” of the tragedy is “estrovertitamente verbale o evocativa” (Portinari, 103).

⁴⁴ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri*, 61. “Alla consapevolezza del fatto che la colpa è all’origine della tragica realtà della situazione attuale, si contrappone l’ideale della giusta ribella di compiere un atto da cui spera di ottenere due risultati: denunciare pubblicamente il tiranno e, in più, redimere se stessa e la famiglia dalla colpa fatale tramite una morte innocente” (Trovato, 55).

character whose heroism is deepened by her internal struggles. However, this heroism acquires its greatest value and is rendered most visible in her public and highly vocalized censure of Creonte. If Mario Fubini and Mario Trovato offer a more generous appraisal of Alfieri's delineation of Antigone's private life, the heroine is seen, by and large, to reach her tragic height in the discursive combat in which both she and Creonte engage and through which her desire for death is realized. The focus thus stays almost squarely on Antigone's tragic consciousness coherently voiced in her discourse with the tyrant.

While the dichotomy between public and private life that Alfieri engenders in Antigone has been highlighted, far less attention has been paid to the mechanisms by which he makes Antigone's private life both necessary for and resistant to her heroic fulfillment, which requires that her death publicly challenge Creonte's political tyranny. Antigone goes to her death reluctantly in the tragedy, with Alfieri illuminating this difficulty through the conflict between heroic discourse and silence. Notwithstanding her ultimately all-consuming desire for death, Antigone simultaneously offers up something bordering on resistance, engaged almost subconsciously. Resounding throughout her confrontation with Creonte, which recalls in many ways her encounter with Argia in the first act, are strong echoes of the conflict between expressible and inexpressible discourses, between the tragic forces that are able to be communicated and those conversely reduced to silence. Brought before the tyrant for the first time upon being discovered with Argia performing the forbidden funerary rites for Polinice, Antigone responds forcefully to his confused query. She declares: "Il vo' dir io" (II, 2, vv. 117).⁴⁵ She alone desires to explain to Creonte the reasons for which both she and Argia have been dragged before him. It is this desire

⁴⁵ Stephanie Laggini Fiore argues that "Antigone's self-affirming presence—'voglio/Vo'—eradicates all images of her as a victimized persona" (Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 100). For Fiore, Antigone's heroism lies in her ability to challenge the tyrant Creonte through spoken discourse.

to prevent her from realizing this death according to her wishes. Consequently, Emone's horrified astonishment at his father's grisly suggestion that Argia's son, and Polinice's heir, is also of the blood of Edipo and thus expected in Thebes to face punishment prompts her to exclaim:

Oh! di un tal padre
Non degno figlio tu! *taci*; coi preghi
Non ci avviliti omai: prova è non dubbia
D'alta innocenza, esser di morte afflitte
Dove Creonte è il re.

(II, 2, vv. 157-161, the emphasis is mine)

Antigone employs once more the imperative form of the verb *tacere*, beholding in Emone's prayers and cries of horror the vain endeavor to forestall the consummation of a fate against which it is impossible to offer up any sort of permanent opposition. Thus Emone's interjections and Argia's attempt to assume responsibility for performing the funerary rites for Polinice come to be seen as superfluous, mere moments of distraction that fail to bring about a deviation from the tragedy's intended course, that is, her death.

But if, for Angelo Fabrizi, Antigone and Creonte are locked in a symbiotic existence in which the heroine is "inconcepibile" without the tyrant, and the tyrant's "fredda ferocia" finds no outlet except in the heroine,⁴⁶ this does not mean that either Emone or Argia is a superfluous figure within the economy of the tragedy, despite Walter Binni's pronouncement that the work as a whole lacks unity.⁴⁷ Far from diminishing the impact of Antigone's public denunciation of Creonte, Alfieri's interpolation of Emone and Argia in the contest between the heroine and the tyrant impels Antigone to claim for herself a more emphatic tragic voice that is ultimately differentiated and

⁴⁶ Fabrizi, *Rileggere Alfieri*, 239.

⁴⁷ Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 72. "L'Antigone è una tragedia ancora mancante di una totale unità e soprattutto viva nel personaggio centrale..." (Binni, 72).

isolated from the other voices around her. Antigone's voice thus achieves a clarity of expression that serves to mark the heroine as irrevocably separate from the tragedy's other characters. In other words, the lineaments of her tragic character come to be ever more precisely and starkly defined against those of Argia and Emone, who attempt in vain to alter the course of her destiny. It is as a result of their failed interventions that Antigone is obligated to declare even more plainly and defiantly her unique hatred of the tyrant as Edipo's daughter:

Non io,
 Non io così, che al tuo cospetto innanti
 Sperai venirme; esservi godo; e dirti,
 Che d'essa al par, più ch'ella assai, ti abborro;
 Che a lei nel sen la inestinguibil fiamma
 Io trasfondea di sdegno, e d'odio, ond' ardo;
 Ch'è *mio* l'ardir, *mia* la fierezza; e tutta
 La rabbia, ond'ella or si riveste, è *mia*.

(II, 2, vv. 186-193, the emphasis is mine)

With her declaration, Alfieri successfully distinguishes Antigone's tragic goals from those of Argia.⁴⁸ The insistent triple reoccurrence of forms of the possessive ("mio") underlines Antigone's isolated status as sole living offspring of Edipo, from which fact derives her implacable hatred of Creonte. The repeated forms of "mio," moreover, underscore her claim to the inviolable possession of her tragic fate and articulate its indivisible nature. But although Alfieri sets as the fulcrum of the tragedy the confrontation between Antigone and Creonte, in which rise two clear, forceful, and unrelenting voices of tragic antithesis, those of the heroine and the tyrant she believes "indegna di sé,"⁴⁹ Antigone does not accept her role as the challenger of Theban tyranny without some measure of resistance. In facing off against Creonte, she does not simply acquiesce to fate nor to its promise

⁴⁸ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes of his desire for each character to have "un motore, benché diverso, pure ugualmente caldo, operante, importante" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 90).

⁴⁹ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 54.

of an otherwise much-desired death. While it is undeniable that she acts as a truth-teller in her fatal squaring-off against Creonte⁵⁰—indeed, she declares: “Sì, voglio, / Vo’ che il tiranno, almeno sola una volta, / Il vero ascolti” (II, 2, vv. 238-240)—she offers up another sort of resistance, this time to fate.

This resistance complicates Antigone’s desire for death and her pursuit of it in opposition to Creonte’s tyranny and the crimes of her bloodline. Antigone goes to her death aware and fearful of the significant losses it will incur upon her and those around her. This is indirectly revealed in her masterful provocation of Creonte:

Oh! se silenzio imporre
A’ tuoi rimorsi, a par che all’altrui lingua,
Tu potessi, Creonte; oh qual saria
Piena allor la tua gioja! Ma, odioso,
Più che a tutti, a te stesso, hai nell’incerto,
Nell’inquièto sogguardar, scolpito
E il delitto, e la pena.

(II, 2, vv. 241-247)

Antigone comprehends the niggling doubts that Creonte seeks to repress, or to silence, as he reigns unjustly.⁵¹ In true Alfierian fashion, tyranny does not preclude but, rather, cultivates fear and uneasiness in the mind of the tyrant, who remains covetous of his ill-gotten power and suspicious of all around him, capable as they appear of mounting a challenge against him.⁵² The typical tyrant of Alfierian tragedy is an individual isolated to the point of paranoia, devoured by the canker of psychic turmoil. It is precisely this tyrant, mistrustful and overcompensating, whom Antigone has

⁵⁰ See Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 100.

⁵¹ Fiore, 100.

⁵² See Alfieri, *Della tirannide*, in *Scritti politici e morali*, ed. Pietro Cazzani, vol. 1 (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1951).

exposed before his court. But in unmasking Creonte and the inner doubts further motivating his tyranny, Antigone unwittingly reveals herself to be, like the tyrant, a character driven by an unspeakable inner turmoil; her vocal confrontation of Creonte's tyranny is fueled by certain regrets, or "rimorsi," that must be kept silenced. If, for Terry Eagleton, Shakespeare's Mark Antony⁵³ transcends death by treating it as the sublimation of erotic experience, which allows him to embrace that death most completely and intimately,⁵⁴ Antigone, on the other hand, treats death not as eroticism sublimated but as the ultimately incomplete purgation of a secret and impossible passion. It is in death that Antigone levels her most decisive blow against Creonte. Nevertheless, although her death has been oracularly preordained, and despite the *amor mortis* that compels her ineluctably to it, she does not sacrifice herself without a powerful sense of regret that renders her final moments all the more painful. In the words of Eagleton, now commenting on Walter Benjamin: "Tragedy is a strike against destiny, not a submission to it."⁵⁵ Antigone's strike against her destiny as daughter of Edipo is her concealed passion for Emone, her cousin and son of Creonte. Not even in death will she be able to eradicate the resulting comingled sentiments of love, despair, and self-loathing.⁵⁶ It is because of this passion that Antigone finds it impossible to embrace death fully and death retains for her a certain element of horror.

⁵³ The story of Cleopatra and Mark Antony was also taken up by Alfieri as a young tragedian, only to be later dismissed by him with the infamous epithet *Cleopatraccia*. See Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi, *Alfieri* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2018), 51.

⁵⁴ In his significant reevaluation of tragedy from antiquity to modern-day, Terry Eagleton writes that in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* Mark Antony pitches himself headlong into the jaws of death and thus transcends death by embracing it fully to the extent of transforming it into an erotic experience. While Eagleton argues that Antony thus rids death of its "intimidatory power," Alfieri portrays death as a frightening venture for Antigone. See Eagleton, *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 104.

⁵⁵ Eagleton, 104.

⁵⁶ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 131.

Scholars have already remarked that Antigone does not accede to the call of death without some resistance.⁵⁷ This resistance takes the form of irruptions of sentiment typically defined as feminine.⁵⁸ Despite being dissatisfied with its depiction, Alfieri himself admitted that Antigone's tragedy stemmed, largely if not entirely, from her love for Emone. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, he writes that the fulfillment of Polinice's funerary rites acts not as the "perno" of the tragic action, "ma bensì solo il pretesto,"⁵⁹ before adding, apologetically, that "questo amor suo per Emone, che pure è solo cagione dei tragici contrasti e della catastrofe, lascerà forse molto da desiderare."⁶⁰ Mario Fubini argues that "l'amore di Emone" constitutes the greatest motivating factor in Antigone's desire for death.⁶¹ Walter Binni contends, however, that the figures of Creonte and Emone, while inextricably bound up in the formation of Antigone's own character, lack poetry.⁶² In a critical refutation of Alfieri's emphasis on the amorous relationship between Antigone and

⁵⁷ Cf. Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 106. For Stephanie Laggini Fiore, Antigone does not encounter any impediment to her acceptance of death. In fact, this acceptance seems to come at very little psychic cost.

⁵⁸ Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana*, 39. Although Ines Ceccoli concludes that Antigone is a figure marked by an all too masculine frigidity that denies her the contrast in character necessary for great tragic heroines, she admits that Antigone occasionally reveals "una delicatezza tutta femminile" alongside her more "virile eroismo" (Ceccoli, 39).

⁵⁹ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 90.

⁶⁰ Alfieri, 91.

⁶¹ Fubini, *Ritratto dell'Alfieri e altri studi alfieriani* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967), 117.

⁶² Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 75. Walter Binni writes that Alfieri reveals in Antigone the "misto di eroico, di femminile, di orgoglioso e di inebriante nella volontà dell'azione e della morte, di trepido e di pensoso nella consapevolezza della fragilità dei sensi femminili, nel timore umanissimo di non aver tutta la forza necessaria a sostenere la morte voluta" (Binni, 75). While it is clear that for Binni heroism and femininity can coexist within Antigone, it is not out of her femininity that her heroism arises. For another reading of the division between feminine love and heroism in Antigone, see Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 54, 59-63.

Emone, Raffaello Ramat writes that “l’amore donnesco, pur così pudico e pietoso entro l’aura di sangue che l’avvolge, rischia di ridestarla dal delirio tragico.”⁶³

In general, there is a lack of critical consensus on the poetic value of Emone’s increased presence within the tragedy, with some scholars acknowledging the ways in which Antigone’s tragic consciousness is heightened by her reflection on her illicit love for the tyrant’s son, and others rejecting Emone on the basis of his perceived superfluosity to the tragic action. Furthermore, there has been an overall tendency not to analyze the structural importance of the relationship between Antigone and Emone and the ways in which Alfieri within the text justifies the attention he pays to it. But it is in the love plot, borrowed from French sources and an innovation brought to the Sophoclean *Antigone*,⁶⁴ that Alfieri locates the ripples of psychic torment and guilt that disturb Antigone’s otherwise limpid and composed tragic consciousness. Moreover, it is a near silent disturbance that troubles the heroine’s resolute confrontation with the tyrant, guarantor of her death, until she finally admits to it as she is dragged toward her demise in the final act. As seen in *Antigone*, and in the other heroines for whom silence plays a principal role in their respective tragedies, silence intimately engages secrecy, which largely takes the form of a concealed amorous passion.

Having revealed his own love for Edipo’s daughter, Emone inspires Creonte to propose to Antigone an alternative fate. Caught like many Alfierian tyrants in the bind of paternal affections and despotism that becomes the altar on which the former are ultimately sacrificed, Creonte seeks to wed his son to the heroine, not in an exercise of benign paternity but as a further affront to the

⁶³ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 55.

⁶⁴ For the convergence between Alfieri’s *Antigone* and seventeenth-century French versions of the classic story, see D’Abicco, “L’*Antigone* di Vittorio Alfieri,” 75-84.

young woman and the familial piety which motivates her. Antigone is thus led to exclaim with repulsion:

Orribil nome,
Di Edippo figlia! – ma, più infame nome
Fia, di Creonte nuora.

(III, 2, vv. 202-204)

The potential infamy of this conjugal linking to the family of her father's usurper, whose machinations resulted in the deaths of her mother, Giocasta, and brothers, Eteocle and Polinice, becomes for Antigone a horror over which she broods throughout the rest of the tragedy. Indeed, when confronted by Emone, who desires to save her, she justifies her refusal of his hand in marriage by declaring that for Edipo, still living in miserable exile, the news of their matrimony would be too great a blow:

Quel padre,
Che del più viver mio non vil cagione
Sol fora, oh! s'egli tal nodo udisse!...
Ove il duol, l'onta, e gli stenti, finora
Pur non l'abbiano ucciso, al cor paterno
Coltel saria l'orribile novella.

(III, 3, vv. 308-313)

In Antigone's earlier encounter with Argia, in her dauntless contest with Creonte, Alfieri imbues the heroine with a sense of tragic urgency. This urgency is felt in her resounding and unflaggingly passionate, even zealous, articulation of her isolated position within the tragic dimensions of the drama, of her motivation in challenging Creonte, and of her demand for the restorative death for which she has been fated but to which she still actively aspires. Now, with her rejection of Emone, Alfieri acknowledges the obverse of the heroine's clear, tragic vocality: the vast silence, founded on secret and illicit affections, that underlies it and by which it is reinforced. In other words, Antigone's initial disdainful rejection of Creonte's offer of his son in

marriage does not simply lead Alfieri to represent “il lento e costante trasfigurarsi dell’eroina in creatura amorosa.”⁶⁵ Rather, through this rejection, the tragedian explores the ways in which Antigone becomes a figure marked by the antinomy of tragic acceptance and tragic resistance through her simultaneous embrace of fate and reluctance to endure it. Alfieri demonstrates how such resistance in a heroine compelled to see in death the only means of depurating a tainted bloodline cannot be openly expressed. Instead, this resistance is both effected and suppressed, silently, until Antigone admits it only once her desired death has been guaranteed. Thus the heroine, cultivating a silent but futile resistance to her tragic fate conforms to a certain extent to the later Antigone of Søren Kierkegaard, whose creation also nurses a “secret” passion for Haemon, her cousin. In the Danish philosopher’s refashioning of the Hegelian concept of the “collision,” Antigone is thus subjected to colliding tragic forces that transform the love plot, which exists in opposition to the heroine’s familial obligations and into which Alfieri delves more deeply than Kierkegaard, into a critical motor of the tragedy.⁶⁶ Far from impinging upon Antigone’s progression toward her inevitable demise, as scholars such as Raffaello Ramat have argued, the love plot that Alfieri emphasizes in the tragedy becomes the means by which to intensify the heroine’s inexorable destiny. Antigone’s attempts at resistance, suppressed as they are even in the very moments in which they are enacted, prove fruitless and yet simultaneously reveal how the

⁶⁵ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri*, 59.

⁶⁶ While Kierkegaard’s version of the Theban heroine is given only incomplete form in the essay “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor,” included in the philosopher’s *Either/Or* (1843), the Danish Antigone pulsates with the mix of modern psychological anguish and opaque sorrow, stemming from her tragic inheritance, that finds an echo in Alfieri’s Antigone. Despite the limitations naturally present in a comparison between the Danish philosopher and the unphilosophical Alfieri, Kierkegaard’s insistence on the centrality of Antigone’s love for Haemon in her tragedy lends support to a positive evaluation of Antigone’s secret passion for Emone in Alfieri. Both the tragedian and Kierkegaard couch the relationship in silence and from this silence derive much of Antigone’s psychic suffering.

path toward death nearly implicates the heroine herself in the crimes of her family. It is this dangerous path that she navigates in near silence, wracked by guilt. Her guilt only increases as Emone refuses to give up his efforts to preserve her life. In response to his plea that she exact vengeance on Creonte through the destruction of his own mortal body, Antigone admonishes him:

Vivi, Emon, tel comando... In noi l'amarci
 Delitto è tal, ch'io col morir lo ammendo;
 Col viver, tu.

(III, 3, vv. 324-326)

By rejecting him outright on the basis that their love only enmeshes them within the familiar web of incest that has led to her family's ruin, she justifies her refusal of Emone's love and endeavors to spare him the guilt they would inevitably incur were they to marry. But it is not without pain that she repudiates her cousin's love for her. Moreover, Emone's persistence in his attempts to save her, persistence in which Ramat views Alfieri's struggle to aggrandize the otherwise feeble character,⁶⁷ only compels the heroine to articulate ever more emphatically her demand for the death that has been preordained for her. When Emone declares that he will put an end to the tyrant himself through an act of patricide, Antigone reiterates the paternal ties that obligate them to accept their eternal separation:

Io t'odio già, s'oltre prosiegui. Ah! pria
 D'essermi amante, eri a Creonte figlio:
 Forte, infrangibil, sacro, e il primo sempre
 D'ogni legame. Pensa, Emon, deh! pensa,
 Che di un tal nodo io vittima pur cado.
 Sa il ciel, s'io t'amo; eppur tua man rifiuto,
 Sol perchè meco non si adirin l'ombre
 Inulte ancora de' miei. La morte io scelgo,
 La morte io vo', perchè il padre infelice
 Dura per lui non sopportabil nuova
 Di me non oda.

⁶⁷ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 56. Ramat utilizes the verb "ingrandire."

(IV, 2, vv. 134-144)

In exhorting Emone to cease in his attempt to thwart her tragic destiny as well as accept his status as “vittima,” a status she, too, claims for herself, Antigone ensures that her death will be accompanied by one last act of familial piety: Edipo in exile will never be tormented by the knowledge that his daughter has been joined in marriage to the son of the odious tyrant. Yet Antigone does not go to her death as a mere passive victim of fate. Instead, her death is contingent on her active renunciation of her own love for Emone. But this love is complicated. It concurrently augments Antigone’s heroism through her renunciation of it and undermines her heroism through its very existence. At the end of the tragedy, when Antigone meets her death, she is unable to completely renounce her love for Emone and ends her life, in the words of Mario Trovato, “accomunata, per questo, al destino dell’‘impuro avanzo’ della sua famiglia.”⁶⁸ Once her death is guaranteed through her ostensible rejection of Emone and her love for him, she finally admits to loving him still. Led away by Creonte’s guards, she encounters Argia, who has been permitted to return to Argo with Polinice’s ashes. She cries:

Ah! vivi.

Di Edippo tu figlia non sei; non ardi
 Di biasimevole amore in cor, com’io;
 Dell’uccisore e sperditor de’ tuoi
 Non ami il figlio. Ecco il mio fallo; il deggio
 Espiar sola. – Emone, ah! tutto io sento,
 Tutto l’amor, che a te portava: io sento
 Il dolor tutto, a cui ti lascio. – A morte
 Vadasi tosto.

(V, 2, vv. 61-69)

⁶⁸ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri*, 62.

The assurance of her death encourages Antigone to offer her most explicit admission of the “biasimevole” love for which her sacrifice cannot be considered wholly blameless. She dies believing herself implicated by the inescapable sequence of guilt that has stained her bloodline.⁶⁹

The significance of Antigone’s death depends on the oscillation between silence and discourse that has defined her character throughout the tragic action. Beneath her clear and coherent protestations against Creonte’s tyranny and her eloquent demand for death lies a substratum of silence in which she couches a deeply interiorized psychological torment that renders her death more painful for her, both more and less desired. As Kierkegaard writes of his own more fragmentary Antigone in *Either/Or*: “Only in the moment of her death can she confess the fervency of her love; only in the moment she does not belong to him [Haemon] can she confess that she belongs to him.”⁷⁰ Perhaps even more so than the Kierkegaardian Antigone, the Alfierian Antigone ends her life possessed of the knowledge that death will imperfectly expunge her of the guilt resulting from her illicit passion. She plaintively indicates her understanding that Emone will soon follow her in death (and it will be his suicide with which Alfieri concludes the tragedy).⁷¹ Despite her best efforts, Antigone is unable to prevent this death, which, openly anticipated throughout the tragedy in Emone’s rash declarations of self-violence, becomes another hidden source of sorrow along with her impossible love for her cousin. Although she manages to realize

⁶⁹ Trovato, 62-63.

⁷⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama. A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor,” in *Either/Or, Part I*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 164.

⁷¹ Noting that Alfieri concludes the tragedy with Emone’s suicide, Raffaello Ramat writes: “Il vero suicida qui è Antigone, anche se non muore di propria mano: l’arma con cui si spegne è la sua volontà di morte” (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 56). For Ramat, Antigone’s desire for death is the tragedy’s predominating sentiment, implicating every other character due to its “contagio eroico” (Ramat, 56). Thus in Emone’s suicide is reflected Antigone’s own heroism.

her *amor mortis*, Antigone resists it all the same through her enduring love for Emone. Furthermore, because her death cannot fully expiate the sin of this passion, at the moment of her life's sacrifice, she does not experience a tragedy that adheres to what Hegel, according to Walter Kauffman, considered "the violation of an important claim that, under ordinary circumstances, would be justified."⁷² Antigone's love for Emone is not merely violated by her tragic circumstances and would otherwise justify itself outside of them. Instead, hers is a taboo that intersects with the classical tragic conflict between political tyranny and familial *pietas*.⁷³ In an analysis of the ways in which silence serves as an auxiliary motor of the tragic action, Antigone emerges as an antinomic figure in whom tragic acceptance is juxtaposed to tragic resistance. For the heroine, death fails to be a completely purgative force, despite initial appearances, and psychic doubt finds incomplete resolution. Similarly, in *Clitennestra*, *Sofonisba*, and *Mirra*, women for whom silence comes to assume an ever greater tragic value, Alfieri does not merely utilize silence to further interiorize the forces of tragedy within the psyches of his heroines. Rather, he transforms silence into a generative tool by which these same women become self-fashioners, to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's designation, within the tragic action and thus acquire subjectivity and an agency through which they will contend with destiny until their tragedies' fatal close.⁷⁴

⁷² Walter Kauffman, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 216.

⁷³ Alfieri will imbue this taboo with even keener psychological sensitivity in *Mirra*, a drama dominated by the domestic conflict arising from *Mirra*'s incestuous passion.

⁷⁴ See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

I.2. Across the Spectrum of Silence: From Villainy to Heroism

a. Clitennestra

In *Agamennone*, conceived as one half of a tragic diptych with the work *Oreste* in 1776, then versified for the first time in 1778, Alfieri presents as a woman given to tormented silences a heroine who is infamous in Aeschylus for her powers of verbal persuasion.⁷⁵ In the earlier *Antigone*, the eponymous heroine demonstrates a marked perspicacity in her understanding of her own silence and the illicit passion which motivates it. Indeed, Antigone is also able to penetrate and plumb the interior depths of Creonte, the rabidity of whose tyranny belies a degree of doubt and uneasiness. But while in *Clitennestra* silence comes to signify, as it does for Antigone, concealed desires and inner strife, the queen ultimately lacks the ability to read and comprehend her silence and the silence of those around her. The opacity of silence thus proves fatal and motivates her descent into villainy and murder. Caught between the poles of morality and immorality, subject to contrasting motivations so that maternal pity for the sacrificed Ifigenia is made to veil her secret passion for Egisto, and increasingly unable to articulate her state of psychological disorientation, which only worsens as the tragedy compels her ever more irresistibly toward the act of mariticide, Clitennestra is a figure whose silence transforms itself into a kind of tragic aphasia. As a result, in Alfieri's first depiction of psychic turmoil bordering on madness,⁷⁶ she comes to possess a consciousness denied the coherence and limpidness of Antigone's tragic cognizance with its heroic contours. Instead, Clitennestra misinterprets the intentions of all those

⁷⁵ Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4. Goldhill writes of the Aeschylean Clytemnestra: "Like Iago or Richard III, the queen's strength and transgressive power stem from her ability to weave a net of words around a victim. It is her verbal deceits that enable her to overthrow order" (Goldhill, 4).

⁷⁶ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri goes on to describe Clitennestra as "insana" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 98).

around her and succumbs to an increasingly opaque tragic bewilderment. This leads not only to a fatal misreading of the tragic forces driving her to murder at Egisto's instigation; it also leads to her incapacity to communicate and organize linguistically the conflicting emotions to whose ruinous bent she gives herself completely,⁷⁷ as Alfieri complexifies the interplay between speech and self-knowledge, between silence and agency, that he earlier established in *Antigone*.

Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi argue that in *Agamennone* Alfieri departs from Senecan tradition⁷⁸ in his psychologically nuanced depiction of Clitennestra, whose stoicism the Roman dramatist plays up before the character's abrupt capitulation to her lover's wiles.⁷⁹ Both scholars affirm that it is "la passione della regina e i suoi conflitti interiori, ben più della vendetta d'Egisto" which provide the Alfierian tragedy with its animating thrust.⁸⁰ Indeed, Alfieri commences the work by positioning Clitennestra's disorientation, only to deepen over the course of the tragic action, at its fore. Immediately following Egisto's baleful invocation of his father's spirit with which the tragedy opens, Clitennestra expresses frustration at being unable to penetrate the young man's thoughts:

Egisto, ognora a pensier foschi in preda
Ti trovo, e solo? Tue pungenti cure
A me tu celi, a me?... degg'io vederti
Sfuggendo andar chi sol per te respira?

(I, 2, vv. 21-24)

⁷⁷ Mario Fubini writes that Clitennestra's "passione disperata lascia erompere, come lingua di fiamma, ogniqualvolta abbandona le sue tenui illusioni o lo schermo fragile dei silenzi e delle parole che vorrebbe opporre alla vista e al volere altrui" (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 181).

⁷⁸ For a more sustained analysis of Alfieri's sources for *Agamennone*, see also Perdichizzi, "Le tragedie senecane e i modelli francesi," in *Testi e avantesti*, in particular, pages 47-58.

⁷⁹ For a brief discussion on the innovations Alfieri brings to the classical figure of Clytemnestra, including the new focus on the queen's psychic turmoil, see also Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, in particular, pages 87-112.

⁸⁰ Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 76.

Clitennestra's confusion is a theme which Alfieri carries throughout the tragedy, becoming one of the forces galvanizing the tragic action and drawing her to the side of villainy. Furthermore, throughout the second scene of the first act, Alfieri repeatedly returns to the word "pensiero" and its variations in order to heighten the contrast between Clitennestra's transparent thoughts shared with Egisto and the young man's "pensier foschi" to which the queen is never granted access, and which she can only interpret unsuccessfully. Indeed, while she declares to Egisto that he will see if her sentiments prove false,⁸¹ unable to prompt Egisto to reveal his mind's workings to her, she is left with little more than her suspicions and fears. On the basis of these she concludes: "Tu m'ami, e il rio pensier pur volger puoi / D'abbandonarmi?" (I, 2, vv. 61-62). It is a misreading of Egisto's reticence, one that hits near the truth but ultimately misses its target, being motivated by the anxieties and dread of an insecure lover. Commenting on his own tragedy, Alfieri writes that Clitennestra's passion for Egisto has left her "una matrona, rimbambita per un suo pazzo amore."⁸² Her mind already deeply unsettled by doubts and anguish of long-standing, Clitennestra hopes in vain that by baring the inner mechanisms of her own psyche she can encourage her lover to disclose his own:

Il ciel ne attesto;
 Nullo in mio cor regnava, altri che Atride,
 Pria ch'ei dal seno la figlia strapparmi
 Osasse, e all'empio altar vittima trarla.
 Del di funesto, dell'orribil punto

⁸¹ "Per te vedrai, / S'altro pensier, che di te solo, io serri / Nell'inflammato petto" (I, 2, vv. 33-35).

⁸² Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 98. For Paola Trivero, Egisto's presence tips Clitennestra fully into the category of unfaithful wife, who no longer acts "la parte della regina d'Argo"; she becomes, instead, merely a woman who "vagheggia una nuova vita accanto all'uomo amato, una nuova unione in cui potranno inserirsi anche i figli di un padre ripudiato e odiato" (Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 91). Trivero even writes that Clitennestra falls so completely under Egisto's sway that she is "non regina, ma matrona" (Trivero, 92), echoing Alfieri's own gloss on the character. For another reading of Clitennestra, see Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 163-182. Like Trivero, Laura Nay reads Clitennestra through established typologies, this time those of wife and mother.

La mortal rimembranza, ognor di duolo
M'empie, e di rabbia atroce.

(I, 2, vv. 96-102)

Egisto, of course, remains tight-lipped. It will not be until after the murder of Agamennone that Clitennestra will realize her lover's true intentions, consisting of his desire for the throne and vengeance exacted on the descendants of Atride. It has been noted the psychically parasitic relationship between Clitennestra and Egisto and thus argued that the young man serves in many respects as the mouthpiece of the heroine's conscience.⁸³

Scholars as a whole have been cognizant of the close psychic interlocking with which Alfieri brings all his characters, not just Egisto and Clitennestra, together until the tragedy's closing act of mariticide severs their interpersonal bonds.⁸⁴ The queen's murder of Agamennone also brings about the psychic disruption by which she acquires the lucidity needed to expose her lover and his machinations. But less attention has been paid to the elements constituting her internal anguish. Alfieri locates these elements in the heroine's inability to articulate coherently

⁸³ Mario Fubini describes Egisto as the "cattiva coscienza di Clitennestra, colui che desta nel fondo oscuro dell'animo della donna il proposito delittuoso e sorge poi dinanzi a lei a imporle l'esecuzione del misfatto" (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 187). For a similar reading, see Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 62-63. Raffaello Ramat argues that Clitennestra is rendered a "succube" of Egisto due to the latter's capacity to hypnotize the queen into conforming to his will (Ramat, 62). For additional readings, see Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana*, 64; and Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 76-77. Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi explicitly state that Egisto's principal function within the tragedy "è quella di ispiratore e rivelatore dell'animo di Clitennestra, della quale appare, a tratti, come la coscienza," (Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, 77). Cf. Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 71; and Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 77. Mario Trovato asserts that Clitennestra, although acted upon by Egisto, is a figure defined by the "angosciosa scelta" she makes in order to continue as the young man's lover (Trovato, 71). Clitennestra therefore possesses a great deal of autonomy, albeit tragically exercised, and does not accept "ciecamente l'amore di Egisto; ma si porrà tormentosamente alla ricerca dell'alibi, su cui poggiare e giustificare la sua scelta passionale" (Trovato, 75). For Walter Binni, Clitennestra comes to be most realized as a tragic figure through her interactions with the tragedy's other characters, even if they still each maintain a life of their own: "Tutti i personaggi pur avendo vita propria collaborano e si integrano" (Binni, 77).

⁸⁴ For one such reading, see Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 77-80.

her tormented state from which result fatal misreadings provoking paranoia, meaningless expression that leads to bewilderment, notably on the part of Agamennone, and the devolution of discourse into suffocating silence. It is the tension between silence and discourse which links her to Antigone, while the incapacity to resolve this tension will link her to Mirra, in whom silence becomes communicated by discourse left in utter disarray and resistant to permanent organization. It is a tension that also calls into question the role of fate within the tragedy, since in the *Parere sulle tragedie* Alfieri curtails its influence, writing:

Clitennestra, ripiena il cuore d'una passione iniqua, ma smisurata, potrà forse in un certo aspetto commovere chi si presterà alquanto a quella favolosa forza del destin dei pagani, e alle orribili passioni quasi ispirate dai Numi nel cuore di tutti gli Atridi, in punizione dei delitti de' loro avi: che la teologia pagana così sempre compose i suoi Dei, punitori di delitti col farne commettere dei sempre più atroci.⁸⁵

Instead, Clitennestra, the tragedian insists, should be judged “col lume di natura, e colle facoltà intellettuali e sensitive del cuore umano,”⁸⁶ evidence of his adherence to an Enlightenment conception of human reason and furthermore of his interest in attributing the queen’s actions less to a remote destiny than to her own inability to govern her passions. Although he condemns her in his commentary and does not eradicate fate entirely from the tragic action, Alfieri nevertheless grants his heroine an agency, albeit seen as poorly utilized on her part, that differentiates her from the classical Clytemnestra, over whom the gods exert a more conspicuous influence.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 97-98.

⁸⁶ Alfieri, 98.

⁸⁷ In his description of tragic men and women, Jean-Pierre Vernant writes: “The tragic agent also appears to be tugged in two opposite directions. Sometimes he is *aitios*, the responsible cause of his actions to the extent that they are an expression of his character as a man; sometimes a plaything in the hands of the gods, the victim of a destiny that can attach itself to him like a *daimon*” (Vernant, “Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,” in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 81).

Clitennestra openly admits her deep passion to Egisto while prompting him to confirm his own love for her. Nonetheless, she is initially unable to make a similar admission to Elettra, whom Alfieri declines to render merely her mother's confidant.⁸⁸ However, Elettra's intellect is piercing. When gently reproaching her mother for not showing adequate distress at the news that Agamennone's return might be delayed or even threatened entirely by storm and shipwreck, she exclaims: "O madre, / Lo amassi tu quant'io...!" (I, 3, vv. 183-184). Clitennestra's response is revealing in its coldness: "Troppo il conosco" (I, 3, v. 184). Here is one of the queen's many ultimately fatal misreadings through which Alfieri animates the play's tragic thrust. Having cultivated a hatred for the king in the long years of his absence, a hatred sparked by his acquiescence to Ifigenia's sacrifice but fueled by her immoral passion for Egisto, Clitennestra reads the world around her through this adulterous love. One of the conclusions drawn from this phenomenological misreading is the paradox in which the queen comes to believe impenetrable the true object of her affections, while Elettra has long since identified Egisto as the reason for her mother's waning love for Agamennone. Therefore, although Clitennestra intones suggestively: "O figlia, i più nascosi arcani / Di questo cor, s'io ti svelassi..." (I, 3, vv. 200-201); Elettra responds immediately with "Oh madre! / Così non li sapessi!" (vv. 201-202). It is thus a false silence under which Clitennestra seeks refuge, her expressions and gestures having already betrayed to her daughter her passion for Egisto. With her secret love having been revealed at the onset of the tragedy, the queen nonetheless alternates between free admission of the adulterous sentiments

⁸⁸ Multiple readings exist to illuminate the figure of Elettra in *Agamennone*. The following three readings each offer a different appreciation of Elettra's role in the tragic action. Raffaello Ramat links the heroine to Antigone, arguing that both women adhere, tearlessly, to an inalterable destiny (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 78). Mario Trovato contends that Elettra recalls to Clitennestra "i sentimenti di sposa e di madre" (Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 75). Lastly, Stephanie Laggini Fiore writes that Elettra and Clitennestra suffer from tragic misunderstanding, as the former, governed by firm moral principles, fails to comprehend her mother's reasons for moral equivocality (Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 167-168).

motivating her rejection of Agamennone and maladroit articulations of another secret, one of which she herself is not yet entirely conscious, i.e. the death of the king. When Elettra encourages her mother to send Egisto away from Argo, adding that Agamennone neither deserves nor will suffer his wife's betrayal, Clitennestra offers a suggestion of the tragedy's final horror divided into revealing brachylogies: "Ma; s'ei... più non vivesse?..." (I, 3, v. 239). As Elettra recoils in disgust, suddenly the queen realizes that her words have let on more than she wished:

Che dico?... Ahi lassa!... Oimè! che bramo? – Elettra,
 Piangi l'error di traviata madre,
 Piangi, che intero egli è. La lunga assenza
 D'un marito crudel,... d'Egisto i pregi,...
 Il mio fatal destino....

(I, 3, vv. 241-245)

For Clitennestra it is a rare moment of lucidity.⁸⁹ Her astonished "Che dico?...che bramo?" makes manifest her understanding of the imperfect silence to which she has entrusted her security and the preservation of her secret wish for Agamennone not to return living to Argo. Her "error" is not simply her improper desire for the king's perpetual absence but the fact that she voiced what should have been left a secret over which to brood silently. It is this vacillation between spontaneous irruptions of speech and unstable silence which Alfieri will foster throughout the tragedy and from which will result Clitennestra's increasing paranoia and diminishing ability to trust her own perceptions as a means by which to anchor herself over the course of the tragic action. Despite her declaration to Egisto that her guilt resides in thoughts still as yet unknown to the king,⁹⁰ her deepening psychological anguish upon Agamennone's unhoped-for return correlates to her failure

⁸⁹ Commenting on the passage in which Clitennestra compares her fate to that of her famous sister, Elena, Mario Trovato reads Clitennestra's insatiable passion for Egisto as the "effetto fatale di una colpa ereditaria, sempre punita e mai redenta, principio di nuovi delitti" (Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 77). The heroine reveals demonstrable self-awareness in this linking to Elena.

⁹⁰ "Rea ben son io: ma in core / Soltanto il son; nè sa il mio core Atride" (II, 1, vv. 14-15).

to keep silent her innermost tragic desires. Indeed, she confesses that before Agamennone, though mute, she could not pretend to love him, that every glance and gesture would betray her:

Oh fera vista!
 Orribil punto! Ah! donde mai ritrarre
 Tal coraggio poss'io, che a lui davante
 Non mi abbandoni? Ei m'è signor: tradito
 Bench'io sol l'abbia in mio pensier, vederlo
 Pur con l'occhio di prima, io no, nol posso.
 Finger amor, non so nè voglio.... Oh giorno
 Per me tremendo!

(II, 2, vv. 135-142)

Clitennestra's anxiety over her decreasing ability to exercise control over body and mind, and thus prevent herself from subconsciously transmitting her odium for the king and endangering Egisto, anticipates the tragedy's actual turn of events and the king's bewilderment upon his return. Here Alfieri establishes silence as an operative force within the work, hastening the tragedy toward its fatal end. Where Antigone's silence acted as a source of psychic doubt for the heroine, deeply interiorizing a tragedy largely enacted in the public sphere before Creonte, Clitennestra's silence acquires a new function within the economy of her tragedy. Unable to resume the role of adoring wife to Agamennone, the queen finds her silence imperfectly able to keep concealed her adulterous passion. As such, this reticence becomes tragically generative in nature, that is, it becomes one of the tragic forces precipitating Clitennestra's fatal act at the conclusion of the tragedy.⁹¹ In the

⁹¹ For a study of the meaning and representation of silence in ancient Greek drama that offers intriguing parallels with Alfieri's use of silence in *Agamennone*, see Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*. Montiglio argues that in antiquity silence was viewed as sinister and capable of negatively affecting the tragic plot (Montiglio, 193). Rather than merely constituting a lack of speech, silence was represented as an action that characters believed could alter the course of tragic events, and yet was often ruptured by speech prompted by divine forces (Montiglio, 194). Montiglio gives special attention to the doubt arising in characters incapable of resolving the tension between silence and speech, a tension engaging the very impossibility of knowing for certain whether one's actions conformed to or resisted divine will. As a result, silence often "fails" in ancient drama, resulting in the passage from "impossible silences to unavoidable words" (Montiglio, 204). This "failure" of silence comes to characterize Clitennestra's ultimately imperfect reticence in the tragedy as she continues in her course toward murder, motivated both by intimations of her

earlier cited exchange with Elettra, Clitennestra makes reference to the fate (“il mio fatal destino” [I, 3, v. 245]) whose mechanisms she believes herself unable to thwart and which Mario Trovato holds as the true protagonist of the tragedy,⁹² despite Alfieri’s own commentary in the *Parere sulle tragedie*. In his portrayal of a silence not completely controllable by the human will and yet to which the queen makes repeated and conscious recourse, the tragedian links Clitennestra’s silence to her complex psychological state as well as to her fatal destiny, enmeshing it within the tragic action so that it at once becomes the mirror of gnawing psychic anguish and of the queen’s inevitable but not unresisted submission to Egisto’s wiles. Silence is thus simultaneously an autonomous act and an expression of a ruinous predestination. Furthermore, it transforms itself for Clitennestra, as for Antigone, into a means of resistance to tragic inevitability and illuminates the inner turmoil that results from this resistance’s failure. But the failure of silence also opens up the possibility for the failure of speech. Upon his return to Argo, despite initial false reports of shipwreck, Agamennone remarks on the unexpected aloofness of his wife and daughter who have come to greet him:

Consorte, figlia
 Voi taciturne state, a terra incerto
 Fissando il guardo irrequieto? Oh cielo!
 Pari alla gioja mia non è la vostra,
 Nel ritornar fra le mie braccia?

(II, 4, vv. 103-107)

tragic destiny and the irruptions of psychological torment that see her resist and finally submit to this destiny. The failure of silence and its relationship to the interplay between personal and divine will returns, with greater psychological nuance, in *Mirra*. Here, however, divine will, revealed in Venere’s wrath at Cecri’s insult to her beauty and fame, becomes a mere pretext which sets the stage for Alfieri’s intimate examination of Mirra’s psychic despair and fatal resistance to tragic destiny through her determined efforts to keep concealed the object of her incestuous passion.

⁹² Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri*, 71. Trovato argues that Clitennestra’s fate constitutes the “causa efficiente principale dell’azione” (Trovato, 71).

While Elettra insists that it was the uncertainty of Agamennone's safe arrival home which has left her incapable of expressing gladness,⁹³ Clitennestra's explanation is clipped and cold, as her words become painful emissions of the lie of conjugal affection she attempts to maintain despite her revulsion toward Agamennone:

Signor;... vicenda in noi rapida troppo
 Oggi provammo.... Or da speranza a doglia
 Sospinte, or dal dolore risospinte
 A inaspettato gaudio.... Il cor mal regge
 A sì diversi repentini affetti.

(II, 4, vv. 198-202)

In contrast with her daughter's more eloquent justification of their strange taciturnity, the queen's defense, composed of tight knots of speech loosely strung together by the characteristic Alfierian ellipses, appears unconvincing, tragically phatic, inexpressive of anything but her dread at being reunited with her husband. If her explanation conveys anything related to information, it is on the level of the subliminal. By retracing an imagined emotional journey from "speranza" to "doglia," from "dolore" to "gaudio," Clitennestra actually plots in reverse the transformations undergone by her psychological state prior to Agamennone's return, beginning with the hope for the king's demise in shipwreck and concluding in that hope's termination upon the agonizing realization that Agamennone has safely disembarked in Argo. In their expression of a false reality, i.e. the abrupt transition from hope to grief, from sorrow to unexpected joy, her words represent the subversion

⁹³ "Per te finor tremammo. Iva la fama
 Dubbie di te spargendo orride nuove;
 Cui ne fean creder vere i procellosi
 Feroci venti, che più di lo impero
 Tenean del mar fremente; a noi cagione
 Giusta di grave pianto"

(II, 4, vv. 203-208)

and collapse of speech. They become silent through omission, and it is in the liminal spaces between the words, spaces in which those same words are stripped of any denotative value, that the silence they suggest becomes telling. In this scene, and elsewhere in the tragedy, Alfieri reveals a keen interest in making silence speak through the verbal delineation of gesture and mood. Agamennone thus comments on the silent downward facing gazes of his wife and daughter. Elettra draws a connection between their troubling silence and the trembling of their bodies, a physical sign of their emotional distress. Finally, Clitennestra suggests that a heart so acted upon by diverse emotions in such a short span of time can hardly be fit to give them adequate expression. To an extent far greater than in *Antigone*, Alfieri therefore concerns himself with the various representations of silence within the tragedy. Indeed, far from being a mere suggestion, as it was for Antigone until her final disclosure of her love for Emone at the moment of her death, silence in *Agamennone* is frequently noted and discussed by the characters and thus woven more intimately into the fabric of the tragic action. Furthermore, Clitennestra is not the tragedy's sole character given to moments of silence. In an effusive admission of paternal sentiment to which his militant and regal attributes seem adjoined almost as an afterthought, Agamennone acknowledges that he often wept in silence before the walls of Troy at the memory of his loved ones in Argo:

Oh quanti giorni,
 Oh quanti notti in rimembrarmi spese!...
 Ed io pur, sì, tra le vicende atroci
 Di militari imprese; io, sì, fra 'l sangue,
 Fra la gloria, e la morte, avea presenti
 Voi sempre, e il palpitare, e il pianger vostro
 E il dubitare, e il non sapere. Io spesso
 Chiuso nell'elmo in *silenzio* piangeva;
 Ma, nol sapea che il padre.

(II, 4, vv. 236-244, the emphasis is mine)

Alfieri, however, distinguishes between Agamennone's honest, paternal silence and Clitennestra's guilty reticence. The king readily admits to his silent weeping and justifies it on the basis of familial remembrances and paternal sentimentality, while the queen denies the connection between her reserved behavior and any perceivable reluctant display of uxorial affection on her part.⁹⁴ By cloaking her silence behind words whose denotative meaning is subordinated to a more allusive and troubling connotative significance, Clitennestra puts that silence into speech, reifies it, renders it perceptible and unavoidable, embeds it within the series of causal relationships determining the tragic action, and thus grants it a central place within the tragedy.

Alfieri will further diversify the roles performed by silence within the line of Atride in *Oreste*. In Act IV, scene 2, Oreste, returned to Argo after an absence of ten years, confronts his mother and Egisto, and struggles to keep his identity concealed. The entire scene hinges on Oreste's growing rage at having to face his father's murderer and her lover while pretending to be an emissary sent on behalf of the king of Phocis ("Andiamo, andiamo; che omai / Più non poss'io tacermi" [vv. 94-95], "Oh rabbia! e tacer deggio?" [v. 115]). However, the hero's tenuous hold on his silence reveals silence itself to be a mere impediment to the course of the tragic action, i.e. Oreste's efforts to confront Clitennestra and Egisto and thus avenge his father; whereas in the case of Clitennestra in *Agamennone*, silence functions as a principal motor of the tragic action and the means by which Alfieri achieves a penetrating examination of the queen's tormented and unstable psyche. If Oreste's ill-maintained silence will be seen as a confirmation of his unwavering identity as Agamennone's vengeful heir (although it will be Elettra who will unwittingly reveal to both Clitennestra and Egisto that the man in their midst, about to be imprisoned and tortured on the

⁹⁴ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 185.

basis of Egisto's suspicions, is the murdered king's son), Clitennestra's own ill-maintained silence, instead, reveals an identity in flux, as the queen devolves from faithful wife into adulterous lover.

In *Agamennone*, however, if Egisto functions as the mouthpiece of Clitennestra's conscience, since it is only in dialogue with him that the queen speaks openly of her adulterous passion, Agamennone becomes the unsuccessful interpreter of that same conscience. He remarks on and attempts to mine his wife's mystifying behavior and uncharacteristic silence for possible underlying motives. Like Clitennestra, the doomed king falls prey to misreadings. Desperate to arrive at the cause of his wife's coldness toward him, he exhorts Elettra to alleviate his doubt:

Ove son iti
 Quei casti e veri amplessi suoi; quei dolci
 Semplici detti? E quelli, a mille a mille,
 Segni d'amor non dubbj, onde sì grave
 M'era il partir, sì, lusinghiera speme,
 Sì desiato sospirato il punto
 Del ritornare, ah! dimmi, or perchè tutti,
 E in maggior copia, in lei più non li trovo?

(III, 1, vv. 11-18)

The specter of silence haunts the king's delineation of Clitennestra's former affectionate behaviors, since his tender reminiscences indicate the current lack of such behaviors. In fact, although he does not make mention of Clitennestra's noticeable reticence, it is Elettra who catches the allusion and attempts an explanation:

In preda a rio dolor due lustri
 La tua consorte vise: un giorno (il vedi)
 Breve è pur troppo a ristorare i lunghi
 Sofferti affanni. Il suo silenzio...

(III, 1, vv. 21-24)

But not contented by such reasoning, Agamennone insists that Clitennestra's silence wounds less than the studied words that occasionally break it:

Oh quanto
 Meno il silenzio mi stupia da prima,
 Ch'ora i composti studiati accenti!
 Oh come mal si avvolge affetti vero
 Fra pompose parole! un tacer havvi,
 Figlio d'amor, che tutto esprime; e dice
 Più che lingua non puote: havvi tai moti
 Involontarj testimon dell'alma:
 Ma il suo tacere, e il parlar suo, non sono
 Figli d'amor, per certo.

(III, 1, vv. 24-33)

Although hardly comprehending that his wife's alternating silences and passionless phrases are the result of her adulterous love for Egisto, Agamennone nonetheless intimates an understanding of the collapse of both silence and speech effected in and by Clitennestra. He opines that the current silence the queen has imposed on herself is not at all akin to the "figlio d'amor" that renders silence expressive and coherent, revelatory of meaning that defies containment by words alone. Instead, Clitennestra's "tacere" and "parlar" are no longer "figli d'amor, per certo." Although his insight ultimately precludes awareness of her betrayal, the king is nonetheless cognizant of a dramatic shift in his wife. While in ancient drama silence was often linked to sinister transformations of character,⁹⁵ Alfieri here complicates the association between silence and the negative permutations it was traditionally held to engender. The tragedian contrasts Agamennone's memory of Clitennestra's loving and communicative silence with her current reticence, now aloof and impenetrable. It is because of this tension arising from these two silences, one positive and illuminating, the other negative and opaque, punctuated by hollow words, that the queen emerges as an incoherent figure for Agamennone, ungraspable, unknowable. If silence fails for Clitennestra

⁹⁵ Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 224. "Silence often heralds a sudden, and sinister, transformation of one's being, such as the emergence of a pain that cannot be told but only cried out" (Montiglio, 224).

in its being unable to corral her illicit desire for Egisto, it fails, too, for Agamennone in its no longer remaining a decipherable code of uxorial love and affection.

In his assessment of the tragedy, Walter Binni argues that the different components of *Agamennone* work together in tragic harmony. The characters are inextricably linked to each other; their tragic delusions and discoveries all result from the common tension in which they are inescapably caught up.⁹⁶ Binni's focus is on the organic unity of the tragedy in which Alfieri leaves no room for superfluous sentiment, nor even momentarily extricates one of his characters from the pattern of causal relationships in which they are entirely implicated. Yet Clitennestra's fatal silence and the calamitous irruptions of speech by which this silence is occasionally broken suggest, contrary to Binni, a large degree of disunity, even chaos. The queen's intermittent reticence and her lack of self-containment act as a centrifugal force. They displace characters from their traditional positions within the family, leading to a measure of alienation that distances wife from husband, mother from daughter, even father from daughter.

As Clitennestra's anguish deepens, she retreats into silence. Upon hearing that Agamennone, though unaware of his adulterous connection with the queen, has banished Egisto from Argo, sparing the young man's life and yet forbidding him to remain, Clitennestra begs Elettra to leave her alone with her thoughts:

Mi lascia,
Figlia innocente di colpevol madre.
Più non mi udrai nominarti Egisto mai:
Contaminar non io ti vo'; non debbe

⁹⁶ Commenting on the relationship between *Agamennone*'s tragic plot and the characters tightly enmeshed within it, Binni writes: "E di questa tensione e di questa finale delusione e dolorosa coscienza di un risorgere e moltiplicarsi dei limiti intorno alle azioni e agli uomini vivono coerentemente i quattro personaggi della tragedia" (Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 77). Binni goes on to address the poetic synchronism of the tragedy's four principal characters, adding that "con mirabile e poetico sincronismo" the characters are "accordati nel finale fortissimo e perfetto, in una comune situazione di delusione e di doloroso sentimento del crollo delle loro speranze e della loro tensione alla libertà e alla felicità" (Binni, 77).

A parte entrar de' miei sospiri iniqui
L'infelice mia figlia.

(III, 5, vv. 313-318)

It is another fatal misreading on the queen's part, one that reveals a continued lack of self-awareness, as her silence will be breached once more in her inability to relinquish her desperate and concupiscent claims on Egisto. In other words, despite declaring that Elettra will no longer hear her utter Egisto's name, Clitennestra will continue to pronounce it in her attempt to keep her lover at her side. Furthermore, her words constitute a misreading on another level: she has already implicated her daughter in her relations with the young man, drawing her into her "sospiri iniqui" so that it will be Elettra, torn between a sense of filial compassion for her mother and love for her father, who will not reveal to Agamennone that she has seen Egisto consort with the queen on the eve of the young man's removal from Argo. Yet Clitennestra's request, strewn with misreadings, still radiates with the lucidity of a woman cognizant of her own limits and inability to articulate the suffering by which she feels herself swiftly overcome.⁹⁷ Before she can take leave from Elettra, she adds:

Sola
Co' pensier miei, colla funesta fiamma
Che mi divora, lasciami. – L'impongo.

(III, 5, vv. 318-320)

Alfieri here allows for a remarkable coherence between Clitennestra's psychic suffering and her own appreciation of such suffering. While the heroine is often unable to grasp the meaning

⁹⁷ Binni, 77. Walter Binni writes that upon murdering Agamennone, Clitennestra is made aware of her "assoluta insufficienza" and thus brought to the realization that the crime committed is not the "risolutivo e liberatore" gesture she had hoped it would be, but, instead, an act leading to a future circumscribed by "rimorso" and "angosce" (Binni, 77-78). The heroine's tragic awareness of her own limitations will inform the subsequent analysis of *Oreste* in which Clitennestra is presented as a tortured sacrificial figure, knowingly unable to reconcile her passion for Egisto with her role as mother to Elettra and the eponymous hero.

of events that lie beyond the margins of her passion for Egisto, and in so doing creates a growing void that further alienates her from her husband and daughter, she nonetheless remains conscious of the “funesta fiamma” devouring her and against which she is admittedly and ultimately defenseless. It is from Clitennestra’s imperfect but undeniable capacity for self-knowledge that Alfieri teases out the paradox of recognition and delusion that defines the queen’s character throughout the tragic action. This opposition brings the tragedy to its fatal close, inscribing Egisto and Clitennestra’s conspiracy to liberate themselves from the obtrusive presence of Agamennone in the fourth act. The exchange between the two adulterous lovers is founded on the tension emerging from Clitennestra’s initial misinterpretation of the crime at which Egisto insistently hints. Her confusion gradually gives way to the agonizing realization of the maritidal act demanded of her. It is a realization arising from Egisto’s provocative silences and cunningly elliptical phrases and becomes, furthermore, one of the few instances in which Clitennestra penetrates the psychic fog normally enveloping her:

CLITENNESTRA	Dunque a tentar?...	E che mi avanza
EGISTO	– Nulla.	
CLITENNESTRA	<i>Lampo feral di orribil luce a un tratto La ottusa mente a me rischiara! oh quale Bollor mi sento entro ogni vena! — Intendo: Crudo rimedio,... e sol rimedio,... è il sangue Di Atride.</i>	Or t’intendo. – <i>Oh quale</i>
EGISTO	Io taccio....	
CLITENNESTRA		Ma, tacendo, il chiedi.

(IV, 1, vv. 102-108, the emphasis is mine)

In apprehending Egisto's thoughts, Clitennestra gives herself up entirely to realizing them, in what for Mario Trovato is the queen's "grave scelta" between sparing her husband's life and murdering him in fulfillment of her irrational passion.⁹⁸ But she remains initially resistant to the "crudo rimedio" suggested to her by Egisto, and it is not until the young man falsely accuses Agamennone of betraying her with the enslaved Cassandra that she, succumbing to yet another misreading or false interpretation ("Cassandra a me far pari?" [IV, 1, v. 139]), gathers enough resolve to commit mariticide. It is a decision which clinches her retreat into a silence from which Agamennone will be unable to withdraw her. The king continues to interrogate his consort in the hope of extracting from her information about the factors motivating her impenetrable reticence. But the more Agamennone pushes his query, the more disorganized Clitennestra's thoughts become, the less able she is to give voice to her suffering, and the further she distances herself from the king as the centrifugal pressure mounting from her unutterable passion isolates her more completely, imprisoning her within a mind fallen victim to confusion and paranoia.

Clitennestra's anguished silence finds its analogue in the still, soundless night of Agamennone's murder.⁹⁹ Alfieri here crafts a perverse juxtaposition¹⁰⁰: above the peacefully sleeping king stands the tormented queen, who proffers an anticipatory confession of the "delitto orribile" she is about to commit but who is nonetheless ruthless in her vacillation, unable as yet to

⁹⁸ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 81.

⁹⁹ "Ecco l'ora. – Nel sonno immerso giace / Agamennone" (V, 1, vv. 1-2).

¹⁰⁰ Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi provide this reading of Agamennone's murder in his bedchamber: "Il pugnale e l'ambietazione dell'omicidio nella camera nuziale sembrano condensare i due motivi che strutturano la tragedia, in quanto il primo è lo strumento della vendetta voluta da Egisto, mentre la seconda – per quanto, forse, suggerita dalla morte di re Duncan nel *Macbeth* – rimanda al rapporto coniugale di Clitennestra e Agamennone, ucciso nel luogo sacro all'intimità della coppia" (Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 80).

see the mariticial act through to completion.¹⁰¹ It has been argued that Clitennestra's hesitation and suffering serve to delay the tragedy's final catastrophe.¹⁰² Yet her silence might be seen, paradoxically, both as an act of autonomous will and as the act of a will obedient to a ruinous destiny, guiding the tragedy to its fatal end. Clitennestra, in other words, is not entirely Mario Fubini's "creatura debole e vinta."¹⁰³ She consciously assumes for Agamennone an ultimately unfathomable reticence that, nonetheless, facilitates Egisto's manipulations and fuels her own irrational fears that all those around her are verbalizing, and thus revealing, what she endeavors to suppress. Her retreat into silence culminates in the crime of mariticide in Act 5, scene 3. Here the queen is a wordless, invisible presence. Although Egisto's remorseless narration of the king's murder bookends Agamennone's cries of betrayal, loosed amid his death throes, Clitennestra slays Agamennone silently. It is not until the subsequent scene that she emerges from her bloody stupor, voicing her confusion over the act she has just committed: "Ove son io?... che feci?..." (V, 4, v. 152). Awareness gradually dawns on her, and in a voice stilted by dread, she exclaims:

...Gronda il pugnol di sangue;... e mani, e veste,
 E volto, tutto è sangue.... Oh qual vendetta
 Di questo sangue farassi!... già veggo,
 Già al sen mi veggo questo istesso ferro
 Ritocer,... da qual mano!... Agghiaccio,... fermo,...
 Vacillo.... Oimè!... forza mi manca,... e voce,...
 E lena.... Ove son io?... che feci?... Ahi lassa!...

¹⁰¹ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 80. For Mario Trovato, Clitennestra's initial inability to strike the death blow stems from her recognition of Agamennone's innocence (Trovato, 80).

¹⁰² Mehrmand, "Virginia e la tragedia femminile nel teatro alfieriano," 138.

¹⁰³ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 188. Mario Fubini insists on Clitennestra's "debolezza," which establishes her as the antithesis of Antigone, whose heroism derives from her rejection of a base feminine passion. Indeed, Fubini writes: "Ma di Antigone Clitennestra sembra essere l'antitesi, tanto palese è la sua debolezza, che essa non cerca nemmeno di nascondere, conscia della propria impotenza, e portata ad abbandonarsi al proprio destino con un abbandono tutto femminile, e con una voluttà, diremmo, di avvilitimento" (Fubini, 177). Instead, it can be argued, more generously, that in the doomed Clitennestra there is nonetheless a measure of resistance to her own acknowledged personal weaknesses.

(V, 4, vv. 154-160)

Clitennestra's narration, interspersed with breathless brachylogies, possesses a macabrely oneiric quality as she struggles to comprehend the magnitude of her crime, undertaken while in a state of extreme disorientation. Her attempt to enclose the horror around her in words fails and terminates itself in a cry of despair. She however regains her voice in the penultimate scene of the tragedy after Egisto reveals his murderous designs on Oreste and thus exposes his plot to exact revenge on the line of Atride and usurp the Argive throne. "Oreste?... oh cielo!... Or ti conosco, Egisto...." (V, 6, v. 172), she says. This desperate exclamation marks another of the few correct readings on her part amid a sea of misreadings, breached but ultimately irremovable silences, beguilements, and false conclusions that have led to the perversion of discourse throughout the tragedy and transformed silence into a source of tragic disunity, into a force both centrifugal and centripetal by which all characters are simultaneously alienated from each other and yet drawn together in fulfillment of the tragedy's anticipated murder of Agamennone. Adopting silence as a tool by which to conceal her illicit passion, Clitennestra condemns herself through her very reticence, committing herself to an act of villainy. But in that same silence's weaknesses, in the irruptions of psychic despair and agitation by which it is often broken, Alfieri finds cause for a psychologically complex and humane depiction of the tragic queen. While Clitennestra ultimately submits to her tragic fate, her psychic disorientation belies her resistance to it, as she struggles to exercise a degree of autonomy amid impossible circumstances. Outwitted by Egisto and a victim of an inextinguishable passion, Clitennestra is, however, far from a passive figure within the tragic action. Alfieri himself insists that she is a "madre pur tanta insana" as a result of an irrational concupiscence that obliterates familial bonds and results in the demise of "il più gran re della

Grecia.”¹⁰⁴ Yet he crafts a woman defined by moments of startling lucidity, even if these moments do not permit the heroine to contain the passion ravaging her or fully comprehend its consequences until after the king’s murder. With Clitennestra, whose tragedy develops, in large part, from the irresolvable tension between silence and discourse, between secrecy and confession, Alfieri enriches his depiction of tragic silence. Assuming greater importance within the tragic action than in *Antigone*, silence in *Agamennone* further reveals how it can be adopted in an excavation of a heroine’s psyche, in an examination of its shift away from heroism toward an ultimately problematic villainy. The tragedian’s complex utilization of silence in *Mirra* is thus anticipated. Finally, in Clitennestra, to a greater extent than in *Antigone*, silence emerges as a troubling and contradictory force that situates the heroine in opposition to her tragic fate. Silence animates the tragedy, motivates it, and challenges the causal logic that destiny imposes on the tragic action by enabling Clitennestra to dwell on her involvement in that action leading up to the tragedy’s final act of bloodshed and to cultivate a sense of personal responsibility. She commits mariticide only after acknowledging that Agamennone’s death is the result of having an unfaithful spouse. “Niuno hai delitto al mondo, / Che di esser mio consorte” (V, I, vv. 16-17), she admits as she pauses over the body of the sleeping man she will soon slay. Going unheard, however, Clitennestra’s confession of infidelity conforms to the interplay the tragedy constantly enacts between silence and discourse.

Through her silence and the disorganized speech with which it is punctuated, Clitennestra reveals herself to be an elusive heroine who navigates her own villainy with a certain degree of psychological independence. Although driven, “insana,” to commit murder by Egisto in fulfillment of his oath to his slain father, she nevertheless recognizes, sporadically but significantly, the

¹⁰⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 98.

mechanisms of her lover's manipulations as well as the personal limitations and imperfect self-knowledge leading her to the crime.

b. Sofonisba

In *Sofonisba*, Alfieri presents a heroine who can in many respects be considered a counterpoint to Clitennestra, and even to Antigone. Drawing inspiration from Livy's account in the *Ab Urbe Condita*, he began work on the tragedy in 1784, then versified it several years later in 1787. Although the tragedy is situated chronologically closer to *Mirra*, which had been versified the year prior, in the *Parere sulle tragedie* Alfieri associates its heroine with Antigone, categorizing both as "donne forti."¹⁰⁵ Even more so than Antigone, however, Sofonisba enacts a tragedy that unfolds in the public sphere, and unlike Clitennestra, she never subordinates her responsibilities as queen to private, immoral desires. She is a figure in whom silence operates differently. Rather than serve as a symptom of a private tragedy paralleling the more public one, as in the case of Antigone, and rather than operate as a force compelling the heroine toward villainy, as it does for Clitennestra, silence must be entirely repudiated in order for her to realize the heroism demanded of her as queen. In the refusal of silence, as well as in the rejection of the domestic themes underlying this silence, Sofonisba manages to effect a heroism of a political temper that ensures her lasting fame as the epitomical patriotic figure who refused to submit to Rome's dominance and thus debase both herself and Carthage.

Although *Sofonisba* emerges from the political concerns necessitating the eponymous heroine's suicide in the final act, and is therefore a tragedy in which political discourse takes precedence, the work is tragically animated by Sofonisba's renunciation of the private affections, i.e. her love for Massinissa, which serve as an obstacle to her political goals.¹⁰⁶ Although Alfieri

¹⁰⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 150. Included in this category are also Virginia and Rosmunda from the eponymous tragedies.

¹⁰⁶ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes: "Sofonisba ha in se stessa tre grandezze; quella di cittadina di Cartagine, nipote di Annibale; quella di regina di un possente impero; e la terza, che assaissimo s'innalza sopra queste due di cui si compone, quella del proprio animo. Sofonisba con tutto ciò non può riunire al

was motivated by the established sublimity of his Roman figures, his primary interest in the tragic story appears to have been the love triangle between Sofonisba, Massinissa, and Siface.¹⁰⁷ As such, in an analysis of the moments in which silence presents itself for Sofonisba as a tantalizing opportunity to satisfy personal interests, he charts what will be the queen's ultimate rejection of her passion for Massinissa and her ultimate acquiescence to greater political ambitions. Sofonisba's trajectory throughout her respective tragedy is therefore the obverse of Antigone's in its successful transformation of silence into unequivocal discourse representing the triumph of heroic political concerns over private love. However, silence exists as a source of tension throughout the tragic action, presenting itself as an opportunity for Sofonisba to exercise her political and personal agency in refusing it, while also becoming an entry, albeit contested, into her inner anguish.

Despite being the tragedy's titular heroine, Sofonisba does not appear until the first scene of the second act when she openly admits her love to Massinissa, whom she had promised to marry before finally accepting marriage to the then more politically powerful Siface in a strategic maneuver engineered by her father, Asdrubale. Neither time nor Sofonisba's marriage has tempered Massinissa's passion for the queen. Believing Siface killed by the forces of Scipione, with whom he is currently allied, the Numidian king urges his former betrothed to come under his protection now that Cirta, a Carthaginian satellite city, has been conquered by Rome. In her

grande l'appassionatissimo carattere dell'amore, perché all'amore suo per Massinissa si mesce e dee mescersi in troppo gran dose l'odio per Roma: l'amore quindi ne ha il peggio; oltre che, a questo suo amore non si può neppure prestare un legittimo sfogo, diventando reo ogni amore in colei che ridiviene moglie di Siface" (Alfieri, 128).

¹⁰⁷ When listing the reasons why Livy's account should make for a worthy tragedy, Alfieri privileges the story's amorous elements: "Un caldissimo amante, costretto di dare egli stesso il veleno all'amata per risparmiarle una morte più ignominiosa; il contrasto e lo sviluppo dei più alti sensi di Cartagine e di Roma; ed in fine, la sublimità dei nome di Sofonisba, Massinissa, e Scipione, queste cose tutte parrebbero dover somministrare una tragedia di primo ordine" (Alfieri, 127).

response, Sofonisba openly expresses her affections for Massinissa while also explaining the political obligations which render a union with him impossible. In so doing, she does not attempt to deny the dichotomy between “cor” and “senno” which forbids her from yielding to her love for him:

Odio, ed amore,
Or mi acciecan del pari. Io qui venirne
Mai non dovea: ma pur, secure loco
Nel mondo omai non rimaneami nullo.
Piacque al mio cor di seguitarti, e al solo
Mio cor credei; ma il mio dover, mio senno,
Mia fama, in Cirta mi volean sepolta
Fra le rovine sue.

(II, 1, vv. 36-43)

While passion for both Antigone and Clitennestra is a source of guilt and psychic anguish, and rarely granted explicit admission unless at the cost of great personal suffering, Sofonisba’s passion for the Numidian king does not easily present itself as a meaningful opportunity on the part of Alfieri to enter into the tortured psyche of the Carthaginian queen.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, because much of the tragic action is ostensibly political in nature, Sofonisba freely acknowledges the “dover” that compels her to act with Carthage’s best interests always in mind. Her acceptance of this duty leaves her unable to openly manifest the same internal divisions as Clitennestra, for example, who is subject to violent fluctuations of character before she murders Agamennone. In addition, with her

¹⁰⁸ Alfieri struggled to make Sofonisba’s traditional status as “moglie di due mariti” conform to the dictates of tragedy. The queen is joined in matrimony to both Syphax and Masinissa in Titus Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri comments on the difficulty encountered in trying to render the situation less risible and more tragic: “Il primo difetto è, che questa moglie di due mariti è cosa, per se stessa, troppo delicata e scabrosa e rasantante la comedia, per potere interamente schivare il ridicolo. Mi pare di averlo in parte salvato col preventive grido della morte di Siface, e col ritrovarsi Sofonisba sposa solamente e non moglie ancora di Massinissa. Con tutto ciò, questo stato di Sofonisba non dee molto piacere ai nostri spettatori” (Alfieri, 127). See also Paola Trivero, “Sofonisba,” in *Percorsi alfieriani* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2014), 74-90.

insistence on “fama,” a theme recurrent throughout the tragedy, Sofonisba becomes a highly vocal presence in the tragic action in an effort to guarantee for herself the lasting and illustrious reputation demanded of her as Carthage’s ruler.

It is Sofonisba’s status as a high-minded, forbearing political figure that has attracted attention, both positive and negative, from Alfierian scholars. In a study of Alfierian women published in 1900, Teresita Magnoni argues that the tragedian aggrandizes his characters and the sentiments leading Massinissa and Siface, for example, to rash effusions of jealousy and Sofonisba herself to suicide as a political act that comes as a result of her calm and inflexible resignation to duty. Thus, for Magnoni, nothing in the tragedy is “rimpicciolito” and everything assumes “proporzioni grandiose.”¹⁰⁹ Later, Ines Ceccoli criticizes the Carthaginian queen for her “virile fermezza,”¹¹⁰ concluding that Sofonisba is “dunque molto difettosa: inaridita dalla preoccupazione politica che non lascia adito a spontaneità di sviluppo.”¹¹¹ Subsuming the queen under the typologies of wife and lover, Paola Trivero suggests that in the tight knot of affections binding Massinissa simultaneously to Sofonisba and Scipione, Alfieri draws on his own experiences in his amorous relationship with the Countess of Albany and in his close friendship with Tommaso Valperga di Caluso.¹¹² Laura Nay agrees with Mario Fubini that *Sofonisba* is a “tragedia della

¹⁰⁹ Teresita Magnoni, *Le donne delle tragedie di Vittorio Alfieri* (Naples: Priore, 1900), 200.

¹¹⁰ Ceccoli, *L’eroina alfieriana*, 146.

¹¹¹ Ceccoli, 147. Sofonisba’s unwavering and inimitable bent for political self-sacrifice leaves her without the “svolgimento dei molteplici contrasti” that makes, in Ines Ceccoli’s estimation, for a great and convincing tragic figure. Sofonisba is therefore “fredda,” even “scialba,” when compared to Massinissa and Siface, who compete for her affections and succumb to passionate displays of emotion that contrast with her more composed demeanor. For an interpretation of Sofonisba as a heroine whose femininity complements her courage on the political stage, cf. Mehrmand, “Virginia e la tragedia femminile nel teatro alfieriano,” 177. For a positive reading of Sofonisba that rejects any claim of coldness on the part of the queen, cf. Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 107.

¹¹² Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 142. Trivero thus proposes a reading of *Sofonisba* that does not deny the tragedy an authenticity of human spirit and passion, seen by earlier scholars, such as Ceccoli, as negatively

rinuncia” in which Sofonisba has from the very beginning of the tragedy already submitted wholeheartedly to death while forsaking her love for Massinissa.¹¹³

tempered by Alfieri’s emphasis on Sofonisba’s insistence on abnegation. For an expanded look at the inspiration for *Sofonisba* that was possibly provided by Alfieri’s close relationships with the Countess of Albany and Tommaso Valperga di Caluso, see also Trivero, “Sofonisba,” in *Percorsi alfieriani*, 74-90. For another reading of *Sofonisba* that stresses the tragedy’s construction of interpersonal relationships, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 323. Mario Fubini argues that the tragedy is notable for its inclusion of not one hero, but four who “di sublime generosità gareggiano, in una gara, il cui ritmo si fa di scena in scena, di atto in atto più incalzante e che suscita, ed essi ne sono consci, una meraviglia sempre maggiore” (Fubini, 323). For a less positive appraisal of Alfieri’s creation of multiple heroes, see Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 135. Although considering *Sofonisba* one of Alfieri’s “tragedie fallite,” Walter Binni suggests, similarly to Fubini, that the tragedy offers up a more abstract struggle in the form of a competition of generosity and sacrifice, that is, “una gara di generosità e di altruismo,” which, however, leaves the characters, including Sofonisba, only scarcely delineated as individuals but nevertheless endowed with sublime dimensions (Binni, 135).

¹¹³ Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 159. Fubini writes that both *Sofonisba* and *Agide* (1786) are “tragedie della rinuncia” in which their respective heroes relinquish from the very beginning their chance to fight (“lottare”) against an adverse fate (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 331). It is Lucien Goldmann who addresses the related idea of a “tragedy of refusal” in his seminal study on the interrelationship between seventeenth-century Jansenist thought as expressed in the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal and the tragedies of Racine, student at Port-Royal. For Goldmann, Pascal’s writings elaborate a line of tragic thought in which man’s search for authenticity and absolute value in a world in which God is “hidden,” or absent, leads him to refuse the world governed by uncertainty and inauthenticity, an attitude that aligns with the Jansenist withdrawal from society. Nonetheless, this refusal is founded on the paradox that necessitates tragic man’s refusal of the world from within the world itself; otherwise, the world is transformed into a formless abstract entity devoid of meaning that nullifies the possibility of its being rejected. In other words, because man comes to know himself within the very world he is rejecting, it is only within the world that this rejection can take place. See Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1977), particularly pages 40-61. In their complete renunciation, through death, of a world on which tyranny impinges, many Alfierian heroes might be seen to enact a similar refusal that is nonetheless removed from the ethico-religious concerns of Racinian tragedy, through which Pascalian thought attains representation on the tragic stage. The heroes of Alfieri’s political tragedies, especially, reject any form of tyranny and seal this rejection through death, yet the value of this rejection lies in their paradoxical acceptance of tyranny itself through which their death acquires meaning. However, in the case of Sofonisba, the queen’s acceptance of death and withdrawal from Massinissa’s love conform more to the idea of sacrifice (“rinuncia”) as opposed to refusal (“rifiuto”). She does not so much refuse an uncertain and inauthentic world as accept that her own values exist in competition with those of the world itself; thus, her death comes as a result of the values assigned to a world in and with which hers are understood to be fatally incompatible.

As this brief survey of critical opinions of Sofonisba's character demonstrates,¹¹⁴ the heroine is largely viewed, both positively and negatively, as a queen sublime in her poetic renunciation of the amorous affections that serve as an obstacle in her devotion to Carthage. While only upon her death can she, following Siface's lead, satisfy the demands of that devotion, it is not without internal strife that she achieves the sublimity which earns her the admiration even of Scipione, who attempts to console a distraught Massinissa by declaring: "Ella, maggior del suo destino assai, / Prova d'amor darti or ben altra intende" (V, 3, vv. 55-56). Crucially, rather than succumb to fate, like Antigone and Clitennestra, Sofonisba, Alfieri makes clear, becomes greater than her destiny, as the tragedian reshapes the role of fate in the tragic action, limiting its power by stripping it of its connotations of divinity more suitable to subjects originally drawn from Greek myth.

Sofonisba's path to sublimity, however, involves not simply a repudiation of her love for Massinissa but, so too, a repudiation of another sort, one that engages the tragedy on a structural as well as thematic level. In order to achieve a noble death uncontaminated by Roman violation of her majesty, Sofonisba must also reject the very idea of private affections and affairs couched in silence. In so doing, she avoids equivocal evaluations of her character and ensures both her lasting fame and that of Carthage. While within the confines of the Argive palace Clitennestra adopts

¹¹⁴ Other scholars of *Sofonisba* have often come to conclusions similar to those already mentioned, with some exceptions. However, when compared to that on *Antigone* or *Agamennone*, scholarship on *Sofonisba* appears relatively scant. For additional scholarship on *Sofonisba*, see Riccardo Scrivano's reading of the tragedy as lacking in poetic value while nevertheless constituting an important stage in Alfieri's tragic career in *La natura teatrale dell'ispirazione alfieriana e altri scritti alfieriani* (Milan: Casa Editrice Giuseppe Principato, 1963), 78. On the tragedy's pessimism, see Vitilio Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1964), 222. See also Pino Mensi's useful reading of the passions displayed by the characters in *Sofonisba* in *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri* (Padua: CEDAM, 1974), 173-179. For some insights into *Sofonisba* and its relation to Alfieri's neoclassicism, see Massimo Manghi, *Il nano e il gigante e altri studi alfieriani* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 1998), 93-95.

tortured silences, often broken by uncontrolled expressions of mistrust, Sofonisba, in contrast, must act in accordance with her publicly visible presence in Scipione's camp, the setting of the tragedy. It is the Roman general's camp which transforms itself into an open arena of spirit, in which Sofonisba seeks to match and outdo the personal nobility displayed by Siface, Massinissa, and Scipione. If Alfieri, indeed, finds *Sofonisba* on the contest of generosity and moral superiority in which the four principal characters engage, a contest rendered all the more tragic given the atmosphere of extreme pessimism that leaves its winners (Sofonisba, Siface) still victims of Roman domination,¹¹⁵ he does so through an increased focus on interpersonal exchanges. This is so because the nature of the contest requires that the characters dialogue openly with one another, addressing such lofty themes as self-sacrifice, friendship, love, and magnanimity, all in an effort to emerge as the moral victor. In fact, Paola Trivero, turning her attention to the tragedy's use of soliloquies, writes that "i soliloqui della tragedia non scoprono segreti o palesano oscuri disegni, perché il soggetto non prevede dei contrasti di passione."¹¹⁶ Alfieri does not abandon soliloquies entirely in *Sofonisba*, but if the tragedy's soliloquies communicate the exertions of an anguished psyche, as they do for Clitennestra, they nonetheless anticipate a certain serenity of mind that will be attained once the sentiments by which they are propelled give way to admission and dignified resignation. Thus in the first scene of the third act, Sofonisba soliloquizes (it is her only soliloquy of the tragedy) and expresses the internal conflict arising from her love for Massinissa, which is undermined by his friendship and alliance with Scipione. Her laments and expressions of confusion reveal a breach in her usual stoic calm:

¹¹⁵ Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 221.

¹¹⁶ Trivero, *Percorsi alfieriani*, 84. Paola Trivero writes that Alfieri's typical use of soliloquies to eliminate the traditional reliance on confidants undergoes a certain transformation in *Sofonisba*. In this tragedy, soliloquies are few and the central characters speak openly to each other of their feelings. See Trivero, "Sofonisba," in *Percorsi alfieriani*, 74-90.

Oh Massinissa!...

Or, di pianto pietoso pregni gli occhi,
 Me stai mirando, e favellar non m'osi....
 Or, con tremanti ed interrotti accenti,
 Tua pur mi chiami: or, disperati e biechi
 Ferocemente asciutti gli occhi torci
 Da sdegnoso; e su la ignuda terra
 Ti prostendi anelante; e solo invochi
 Con grida orrende le furie infernali....
 Ah! nel mio petto le tue furie istesso
 Trasfuse hai già.

(III, 1, vv. 5-15)

If a similar soliloquy on the part of Clitennestra might betray secret passions and disorganized but ominous intimations of Agamennone's murder, otherwise cloaked in silence, Sofonisba's soliloquy does not reveal knowledge unknown to other characters or the audience itself. She has already admitted the love for Massinissa which led her to Scipione's camp in Act II.¹¹⁷ Her soliloquy thus predicates itself on knowledge either open from the start, i.e. her love for Massinissa, or knowledge that she will soon make open, i.e. her refusal to submit to Roman humiliation as part of Cirta's spoils. In the same soliloquy, she declares: "Or io Scipion vo' udire, e far ch'egli oda / Di Sofonisba i sensi...." (vv. 19-20). In this pronouncement, speech prevails over reticence and truth over evasion, since Sofonisba will address Scipione forthrightly and declare both her political allegiance to Carthage and her revulsion at the possibility of being dragged to Rome as a war trophy. However, the unexpected sight of Siface, immediately following this declaration, prompts a genuine reaction of anguished astonishment: "Ma, chi veggo / Venir ver me? Fors'io vaneggio?... Oh cielo! / Vivo Siface?... in questo campo?... Oh vista!" (vv. 20-22). Her voice drops into silence, her spirit nearly overcome by the sudden reappearance of Siface,

¹¹⁷ "Piacque al mio cor di seguitarti, e al solo / Mio cor credei" (II, 1, vv. 40-41).

who, immediately apprehending his wife's dismayed look and suggestive inability to speak, exclaims:

Ah! di vergogna, e a un tratto
 Di morte l'orme (oh cielo) impresse io veggio
 Sul tuo smarrito volto? Assai mi parla
Il tuo silenzio atro profondo: io leggo
 Dentro al tuo cor la orribile battaglia
 Di affetti mille. Ma, da me rampogna
 Niuna udrai tu

(III, 2, vv. 35-41, the emphasis is mine)

Siface astutely draws attention to the queen's "silenzio atro profondo." In a tragedy animated by the overturning of silence and its characters' noble garrulousness, even Sofonisba's reticence, rare as it is, speaks. Earlier in *Agamennone*, Alfieri had depicted silence as a consequence of an inner state subject to violent contradictions and turmoil, but despite Clitennestra's frequent irruptions of confused and distrustful speech, *Agamennone* never successfully penetrates the secrets of his wife's mind and so fatally succumbs to his misreading of her silence. In the tragedies in which a lack of speech predominates, Alfieri reveals how silence can be both polysemic and diversely utilized in examinations of tragic character. Thus, for *Antigone*, silence makes manifest a spirit grappling with a contaminating passion and becomes a reservoir of personal guilt, irremovable despite the heroine's willing acceptance of a fate by which to purify her ill-fated bloodline. For Clitennestra, silence, too, connotes an illicit passion, but one that has conquered all reason. Her reticence permits Alfieri to enter into a mind stripped of all coherence and a rational internal logic. Furthermore, the tragic action of *Agamennone* is in large part generated by the bewilderment produced as a result of Clitennestra's silences, which implicate Elettra and prevent her from admitting her concerns about Egisto to her father. In *Sofonisba*, however, silence becomes an impediment which must be entirely removed even for the tragedy to

reach its fatal conclusion. The heroine's death depends both on her refusal to submit to silence and her insistence on defiantly articulated protestations and expressions of patriotic sentiment. Siface's perceptive reading of her silence serves to galvanize Sofonisba and enables her to throw off the imposition of silence that would have prevented her from realizing her political objectives.¹¹⁸

This definitive refusal of silence is not without its internal struggle. The heroine says:

...Ardirò pur, ma con tremante voce,
 L'alma mia disvelarti. – A dir, non molto
 Mi avanza: in mio favor, troppo dicesti
 Tu, generoso: a morir sol mi avanza,
 Degnamente, qual moglie di Siface,
 Qual d'Asdrubale figlia. – Al suo, che sparse
 Del tuo morir la fama, è ver, ch'io ardiva
 La mia destra promettere; ma data
 Non l'ho: tu vivi, e di Siface io sono.

(III, 2, vv. 73-81)

The “tremante voce” with which she addresses her spouse is only temporarily weakened by the contrast of passions to which she is subjected; her voice will strengthen concurrently to her dedication to Siface's noble example. It is here that Alfieri poses and then removes all further traces of any vacillations of character on her part. Sofonisba's decision to confess to Siface the secrets of her “alma” confirms her rejection of the deceit that silence would have imposed on her. On a thematic level, such a decision further substantiates the negative associations silence takes on for Alfieri in the tragedy. Where silence is morally fraught for Antigone, and irrational and indicative of betrayal for Clitennestra, silence in *Sofonisba* becomes a contemptible force, capable of rendering petty spirits otherwise inclined toward greatness. It is speech, through which magnanimous gestures can be made, that ennobles.

¹¹⁸ Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri*, 177. “La massima delicatezza del poeta consiste infatti in ciò, che Siface non sforza la donna a parlare, anzi parla egli per vincerne l'angoscioso imbarazzo, e parla a lungo, con una generosità disperata, che contribuisce certo a rafforzare in Sofonisba la risoluzione di una scelta per altro inevitabile a uno spirito intransigente come il suo” (Mensi, 177).

As part of this process of tragic ennoblement, a process which Alfieri has all four principal characters undergo, Sofonisba must renounce not only silence but, so too, the feminine affections masked by her reticence. As such, having determined to remain faithful to Siface, and after demanding an audience with Scipione, she declares to the Roman general:

In me, bench'io pur donna,
Femminili pensier non ebber loco,
Se non secondo. Amai chi meglio odiava
Voi, superbi Romani.

(III, 3, vv. 153-156)

Through the suppression of her genuinely felt affection for Massinissa, she enacts a renunciation of silence. It is a suppression possible only through her resolved and unremitting avowal of death in defiance of Roman occupation and in concert with Siface to whose dignified patriotism she adheres.¹¹⁹

In *Antigone*, the heroine's articulation of her desire for death becomes increasingly fervent over the course of her contest with Creonte, and, indeed, is strengthened by her limpid comprehension of the impossibility of her love for Emone, a hidden source of suffering and guilt necessitating her acceptance of the fate oracularly determined for her. But while her heroism is further motivated by a secret—and, later, barely admissible—passion, Sofonisba's heroism strengthens as a result of her public refusal of private affections. Her demand for death in fulfillment of her duty to Carthage and as wife of Siface actually intensifies upon her open rejection of her love for Massinissa. Therefore, when Siface again urges her to put aside her desire for death and avenge his own demise by living, she responds:

A vendicarci,

¹¹⁹ Cf. Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 159. Laura Nay asserts that Sofonisba's sacrifice is greater than Siface's due to the love the queen is unable to deny for Massinissa. Nay perhaps overlooks Siface's own strongly felt affections for Sofonisba, which lead him to prioritize Sofonisba's safety throughout much of the tragic action.

Non dubitarne, altri rimane. Ogni uomo
 Il suo dover qui compia; il mio si cangia,
 Al rivivere tuo. – Svelato appieno
 T'ho del mio core i più nascosi affetti

(III, 3, vv. 191-195)

Her riposte immediately prompts an admiring Scipione to commend the nobleness of spirit expressed through her speech: “Franco e sublime il tuo parlar, mi è prova, / Che me nemico non volgare estimi” (III, 3, vv. 198-199). But if Sofonisba’s heroism is assured through a repudiation of sentiment by which feminine attributes, closely linked to silence, are sublimated by an exalted inclination for death, Alfieri, instead, ennobles the characters of Siface and Massinissa through a reverse procedure, leading some scholars to argue that both kings are granted more poetic complexity than Sofonisba herself.¹²⁰

While Sofonisba’s acceptance of her obligations to Siface and Carthage does not come without a measure of psychic suffering, which Alfieri only intimates, both Siface and Massinissa fail to relinquish their affections for the heroine just as stoically. The two heroes repeatedly express their love openly and passionately and are granted a tragic magnanimity due to their ardent and increasingly desperate efforts to save Sofonisba’s life. Massinissa contrasts himself with the collected and politically minded Sofonisba when he reveals himself willing to surrender his kingdom and power in exchange for her safety:

Ah! di ben altra fiamma arde il mio core,

¹²⁰ For a reading of Sofonisba as inferior to her two lovers, see Ceccoli, *L’eroina alfieriana*, 147-148. Mario Fubini, on the other hand, views Massinissa negatively, writing that the king “grida per quattro atti la propria furia amorosa e non per questo riesce a infondere ammirazione e vita nella tragedia portando con la sua passione una nota contrastante con la sublimità degli altri personaggi” (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 328). However, Fubini praises the figure of Siface, comparing him favorably to Alfieri’s most fully realized hero, Saul (Fubini, 329). For a similar appraisal of Siface, see Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 146. Paola Trivero, unlike Fubini, sees in Siface a possible “figura ingloriosa” and in Massinissa the tragedy’s least risible character given his finely delineated struggle to reconcile his passion for Sofonisba with his friendship with Scipione (Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 141-142).

Che non il tuo.... Grandezza e gloria e fama,
 Tutto in te sola io pongo.... Esser dei mia;
 Pera il mio regno; intero pera il mondo;....
 Tu mia sarai.

(IV, 3, vv. 35-39)

Massinissa's desire to guarantee Sofonisba's life leads him to a progressively more passionate vocalization of his love and to gestures of increasing selflessness. Cognizant of the heroine's dedication to Siface, the Numidian king announces that he will endeavor to save them both:

Guidato

Io da furie ben altre, omai tacerti
 Il mio non posso; nè cangiare io 'l voglio,
 Se pria spento non vado. Ad ogni costo
 Salvare io voglio or Sofonisba; e salva
 Ella (il comprendo) esser non vuol, nè il puote,
 Se non è salvo anco Siface.

(IV, 4, vv. 96-102)

Massinissa intends to spirit both Sofonisba and Siface from the Roman camp with the aid of his Numidian forces, but his generosity only spurs Siface to give vent to his own internal torment arising from the knowledge that Sofonisba's affections lie still with his rival, who alone is in a position to deliver her from infamy as a Roman captive:

A riamato amante

Ignoti sono i miei martirj... Ah! crude
 Tanto or son più veggio Sofonisba intenta
 A smentire magnanima gli affetti
 Del piegato suo core.

(IV, 4, vv. 166-171)

Siface's irruption of despair is a vocal confirmation of his anguish as an unrequited lover and serves to throw into relief Sofonisba's own stoic reserve and the contrasting process by which she assumes heroic dimensions within the economy of the tragedy. By varying the connotations of

silence and speech throughout the tragic action, and by distinguishing between Sofonisba's self-possession, revealed through her declarations of patriotic constancy, and her husband's and lover's ardent and effusive assertions of their love for her, Alfieri must work to prevent the tragedy's eponymous heroine from diminishing in stature alongside the work's more prolix characters.¹²¹ Although granting her name to the tragedy, Sofonisba occupies a less physically prominent place within the tragic action, even if her example and the love she inspires serve as its driving force. This creates a certain tension within the tragedy when in the fifth act Alfieri utilizes Sofonisba's absence to draw attention to Massinissa's ineffectiveness at removing both her and Siface from Scipione's camp. Alfieri's decision to delay the queen's reappearance in the final act positions Massinissa, his divided loyalties, and internal anguish at the fore of the concluding tragic action. This decision also engages the same process of ennoblement which has already rendered Sofonisba a laudable and yet somewhat psychically elusive heroine throughout the tragedy, because while the tragedy is axiologically informed by her political high-mindedness, the tragic action itself oscillates between her political integrity and the love plot from which this integrity excludes her full participation. Alfieri confirms this thematic imbalance when he writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that Sofonisba, despite her numerous qualities, "non può riunire al grande l'appassionatissimo carattere dell'amore," since this would conflict with her political ideals.¹²² In contrast with Massinissa who visibly suffers from his inability to guarantee his lover's safety, the heroine with her delayed arrival in the final act emphasizes once more her refusal to indulge in

¹²¹ For a counterpoint, cf. Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 323-332. Mario Fubini argues that it is Siface, and not Sofonisba, who emerges as the tragedy's most original character and the figure who should have been considered the work's protagonist (Fubini, 331).

¹²² Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 128.

intimate affections at the cost of her principled dedication to her political objectives. Speech, then, and the act of speaking come to represent this definitive refusal as the tragedy reaches its close.

Much to Massinissa's dismay, Scipione reveals that Sofonisba has disclosed to him the plan to liberate both the Carthaginian queen and Siface from the Roman camp:

La tua *stessa*
Sofonisba, che t'ama, (il crederesti?)
Ella *stessa* svelare a me tue trame
Appieno or dianzi fea...

(V, 3, vv. 38-41, the emphasis is mine)

Scipione's double use of the adjective "stessa" serves both to isolate the queen from Massinissa and set her on an exalted plane. Sofonisba's act of revealing the Numidian king's, and her lover's, intentions takes its place among the series of acts in which she overcomes her reticence and assumes a tragic voice through which her political ends might be realized and Massinissa's claims on her heart, an impediment to a dignified death, rejected. Alfieri, however, refrains from depicting the moment of Sofonisba's betrayal to Scipione; moreover, he has the Roman general relate to Massinissa news of Siface's recent suicide, which occurred unseen. By having both important events merely relayed by Scipione, Alfieri distances the doomed Sofonisba and Siface from Massinissa. He effects their transformation into emblematic figures of patriotic loyalty and dignity in the face of political oppression, while privileging his foray into the psychic turmoil behind Massinissa's lover's plight.

When Massinissa in his despair confronts Sofonisba, he reproaches her for her unfaithfulness: "Perfida! ed anco all'inumano orgoglio / Il tradimento aggiungi?" (V, 5, vv. 96-97). His accusation of her inhuman pride and betrayal underscores his personal despondency at the

failure of his plot to succor the heroine and alter what has been seen as her irreversible destiny.¹²³

Sofonisba's response, however, reveals her capacity to reason and make a case for a death that to Massinissa appeared possible to avoid:

Teco sottrarmi dal romano campo,
 Nol poss'io, se non perdo appien mia fama,
 Di vero amor troppo mi amasti e m'ami,
 Per salvarmi a tal costo: io, degna troppo
 Son del tuo amor, per consentirtel mai.
 Null'altro io dunque, in rivelar tue mire,
 Ho tolto a te, che la funesta possa
 Di tradir la mia fama e l'onor tuo.

(V, 5, vv. 104-111)

By insisting on "fama," which word appears twice, she justifies her act of divulging and ultimately refusing Massinissa's plan to save her life. By openly rejecting her lover and welcoming death, she guarantees for herself a lasting reputation unspoiled by any Roman humiliation of her as a captive and preserves Massinissa's honor and standing with Scipione, his friend and ally.¹²⁴ In both her outright rejection of silence and consequent and vocal embrace of patriotic ideals which subsume her private affections, she individuates and substantiates her own heroism, navigating the tragic action on the basis of a personal autonomy that permits her to realize death on her own terms. Her lack of hesitation and coherence of thought and action differentiate her from the tormented and confused Clitennestra, but her stoic resolve does not deny her moments of grief and intense suffering. Having already consumed the poison that will take her life, she requests that Scipione lead Massinissa away so that she might die alone, unseen and dignified, and in so doing spare her lover the pain of having to behold her in her final moments:

Deh! Scipio.... ah! nol lasciare: altrove

¹²³ For one reading of Sofonisba's inalterable fate, see Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 222-223.

¹²⁴ Trivero, *Percorsi alfieriani*, 88-90.

Fuor della vista mia traggilo a forza.
 Ei nato è grande, e il tuo sublime esempio
 Il tornerà pur grande: a Roma, al mondo
 Sua debolezza ascondi.... Io.... già.... mi sento
 Gelar le vene,... intorpidir la lingua. —
 A lui non do,... per non strappargli il core,...
 L'estremo addio.

(V, 7, vv. 236-243)

In a tragedy in which heroism and nobility predicate themselves on the renunciation of passion capable of being maintained only through silence and on the willing adherence to political and patriotic ideals publicly expressed, Sofonisba in her death engages the paradox of silence and speech operating in tension throughout the tragic action. Silent and unwitnessed, her death is nonetheless expressly designed to ensure her fame. Furthermore, by having Massinissa removed from her sight, she prevents her lover's reputation from being tarnished by any unbecoming displays of emotion.¹²⁵ Scholars have commented on the role that fate plays within the tragedy, rendering Sofonisba's death an inevitability due to her indissoluble link to Carthage that renders theirs a shared destiny, that is, Carthage's downfall makes her demise a necessity.¹²⁶ Yet amid the tension of silence and speech, less intensely felt perhaps than in *Agamennone*, Sofonisba manages to act according to a personal autonomy despite her tragic destiny. Her heroism grounds itself, in part, on an autonomous negotiation of the logic of silence and speech which renders her death as

¹²⁵ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 326. Alfieri, however, will explore male grief in his final tragedy, *Alceste seconda*.

¹²⁶ Vitiello Masiello contends that Sofonisba's fateful sacrifice results from the tragedy's "polarità individuo-realtà" in which the tragedy's individual characters find themselves unable to alter an invincible reality that demands their death (Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 222). Masiello's reading argues for the supremacy of the work's political dimensions, to which Sofonisba and Massinissa's love is fatally subordinated. In a similar reading, Pino Mensi maintains that Sofonisba's political destiny as queen of a conquered kingdom cannot be effectively challenged by any competing amorous forces (Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri*, 175).

much the result of a personal choice as a political necessity, and which underlies her definitive subordination of private amorous sentiment to political idealism by the tragedy's end. Nevertheless, in the tragedy's closing words, Alfieri perhaps allows for the transposition of Sofonisba's own internal anguish to which she is unable to give full expression. Having elected to sacrifice herself publicly out of patriotic devotion to Carthage and her declared hatred of Rome, she cannot openly convey the torment arising from her decision to die rather than abscond with Massinissa.¹²⁷ Thus her silent, incommunicable suffering at the moment of her death is made to contrast starkly with Massinissa's own final cries of rage and despair over her suicide, which seals their parting:

Ah!... Dalla rabbia,... dal dolor.... mi è tolta....
 Ogni mia possa.... Io.... respirare.... appena,...
 Non che.... ferir....

(V, 7, vv. 246-248)

¹²⁷ Mensi, however, writes that Sofonisba's final words evince "una austera serenità" derived from a spirit finally "in pace con se stesso" as a result of her ultimately unshakeable adherence to her principles (Mensi, 179). It can be argued, nonetheless, that Sofonisba's serenity at the moment of her death is only possible given the presence of Massinissa, through whom Alfieri voices the passion suffered by the queen, a passion otherwise at odds with these principles.

I.3. Embedding and Enacting Tragic Silence in *Mirra*

Alfieri's examination and continued recuperation of silence culminates in *Mirra*, whose tragic action is entirely motivated by its heroine's tortured reticence. Here, as nowhere else within Alfierian tragic theater, silence constitutes the primary impulse driving the tragic action, indeed, to the point that the tragedy's actual scabrous subject matter—Mirra's incestuous passion for her father¹²⁸—becomes ancillary to the investigation into the embattled psyche of Mirra herself as she endeavors to keep the object of her illicit desires concealed.

Alfieri first conceived of the tragedy in 1784 after an inspired reading of Ovid's account of Myrrha in the *Metamorphoses* before versifying the work two years later in 1786. In the *Vita*, Alfieri refers to the tragedy's novel utilization of silence when he recounts his difficulty in basing the work's plot solely on his silent heroine's psychological suffering: "Sentii fin da quel punto l'immensa difficoltà ch'io incontrerei nel dover far durare questa scabrosissima fluttuazione dell'animo di Mirra per tutti gl'interi cinque atti, senza accidenti accattati d'altrove."¹²⁹ Although in the *Parere sulle tragedie* he mentions "quella imperiosa forza del Fato"¹³⁰ as a reason for which Mirra should be pitied and not reviled, Alfieri moves beyond external concepts of divine fate in

¹²⁸ On literature's engagement with the theme of incest, see Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend. Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). With regard to father-daughter relationships, including the relationship between Mirra and Ciniro in Alfieri's tragedy, see, in particular, pages 300-33.

¹²⁹ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, vol. 1, ed. Luigi Fassò (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1981), 259.

¹³⁰ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 130.

order to adapt the Ovidian heroine's illicit passion to eighteenth-century theatrical customs.¹³¹ For this reason, the drama unfolds almost entirely within the recesses of Mirra's tormented mind.¹³²

Mirra's silence, increasingly undermined by her involuntary irruptions of confessional speech, has left her one of Alfieri's most enduring and psychologically complex female protagonists. But her silence links her to the other silent women belonging to Alfieri's tragic corpus whose silence is self-generated and must be negotiated until the tragedy's fatal close. It is, in part, through the self-imposition of silence, through a depiction of its limitations, its occasional rupturing by anguished utterances, that Alfieri realizes the creation of psychologically rich and nuanced tragic women. However, unlike in other tragedies concerned with their heroines' silence, silence predominates in *Mirra*, constituting for Giuseppe Guido Ferrero one of the "due temi poetici dominanti della tragedia," along with Mirra's unremitting desire for death.¹³³ Her adamant refusal to articulate the reasoning behind her despair and anomalous behavior forms the nucleus of the tragedy, the central mystery the tragedy's other principal characters work to resolve, thereby unwittingly precipitating her demise. In fact, they paradoxically reinforce and undermine Mirra's silence in their unrelenting attempts to induce her to speak. The heroine is, however, the tragedy's only figure fully cognizant of the ruinous implications of her silence and thus presents a limpid consciousness that differentiates and isolates her from her parents, nurse, and betrothed. She

¹³¹ Alfieri writes that Myrrha's confession to her nurse about her love for her father led him to believe (after it first moved him to tears) that "una tale passione, modificata e addattata alla scena, e racchiusa nei confini dei nostri costumi, potrebbe negli spettatori produrre l'effetto medesimo che in me ed in altri avrà prodotto quella patetica descrizione di Ovidio" (Alfieri, 130-131).

¹³² Vernant, "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 49. See also Monica Streifer, "Affirming Life Through Death: Female Subjectivity in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri and Gabriele D'Annunzio," *La Fusta, Rutgers Journal of Italian Literature and Culture* 21 (Fall 2013), <https://italian.rutgers.edu/images/PDFs/LaFusta-article5.pdf>.

¹³³ Giuseppe Guido Ferrero, "Lingua e poesia nelle tragedie alfieriane," in *Annali Alfieriani del Centro Nazionale di Studi Alfieriani*, vol. 2 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1943), 178.

ruminates upon silence, dwelling not simply on the taboo couched in that silence, that is, her incestuous passion for Ciniro, but also on silence's ability to reveal human fragility and absurdity. However, through her silence, Mirra mounts a defiant, if futile, resistance to each.

Mirra therefore stands as Alfieri's clearest articulation of silence, its effects on the mind, and its role within the dimensions of the tragedy. Mirra is a figure characterized by imperfect self-censorship. As has often been noted, she intimates her illicit desire for her father despite the verbal suppression of her secret.¹³⁴ At the same time, she demonstrates a paradoxical volubility. While seeking to subdue an infamous passion, she speaks tellingly and openly of her silence. Through the articulation of the dimensions of and necessity for her silence, she reveals a capacity for self-knowledge similar to that displayed by Antigone. Yet her self-knowledge is more penetrating, given that the tragedy comes to be nearly entirely interiorized within her psyche. It is this tragic interiorization which has prompted Guido Davico Bonino to characterize *Mirra* as the "prima tragedia in cui un personaggio 'è parlato' dal suo subconscio."¹³⁵ Although her silence is often breached by involuntary subconscious impulses, increasing her anxiety and despair over the course of the tragedy, Mirra also often speaks *consciously* and intelligently of her silence. However, it is an elucidation of a state that, in its inability to be complete, fails to circumvent the tragedy's anticipated final horror. Nonetheless, her attempt to enucleate her silence, even partially,

¹³⁴ See Binni, "Lettura della *Mirra*," in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 169-193. See also Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 127-141; and Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri*, 202-204. For another useful but more extended reading, see Roberto Alonge, *Mirra l'incestuosa* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2005). For a reading that deviates from traditional criticism but offers a provocative psychoanalytical take on the significance of Mirra's speech, see Margherita Frankel, "Mirra: non silenzio ma rivelazione calcolata," *Italica* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 35-55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/478118>.

¹³⁵ Guido Davico Bonino, "Nota introduttiva," in *Mirra*, by Vittorio Alfieri (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1988), vii.

demonstrates the dialectic between silence and speech in which her tragic resistance lies, since she looks to speak without betraying herself, to stay silent without remaining completely wordless. She suggests this dialectic in her plea to Ciniro and Cecri. Mistakenly believing the impending nuptials to be the cause of her inexplicable melancholy, her parents have implored her to reject the marriage with Peréo. In response, she explains that she cannot provide any explanation for her sadness but assures them it was never her intention to cause them distress:

Ma in somma,
 (Deh! mel credete) in mio pensier non cadde
 Mai di attristarvi, nè di trarvi a vana
 Pietà di me, coll'accennar mie fere
 Non narrabili angosce.

(III, 2, vv. 105-109)

The silence enshrouding Mirra's "non narrabili angosce" has long been a focal point of scholarly criticism on the tragedy.¹³⁶ In the *Vita*, Alfieri writes that in *Mirra* he purposely withholds knowledge of the object of Mirra's passion until the end. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X, vv. 298-502),¹³⁷ Myrrha openly confesses her incestuous desires to her nurse, who then engineers a plan by which the maiden is able to enter, initially disguised, her father's bed. By contrast, Alfieri insists upon silence in his tragedy, writing that his Mirra suffers, visibly but silently, the passion

¹³⁶ For additional readings of Mirra's silence, see Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 127-144; and Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri*, 197-210. For a concise analysis, see Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 147-152. See also Angelo Fabrizi, *Le scintille del vulcano* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1993), 275-283. For an understanding of the Ovidian underpinnings of the tragedy and the innovations Alfieri brings to the story of Myrrha, see Marziano Guglielminetti, *Saul e Mirra* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1993), 33-81. For a general overview of the myth of Myrrha and its permutations in Italian literature, see Francesco Ferranti, "Per una rilettura del mito di Mirra: analisi e commento (Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*, X 298-502)" (PhD diss., Università di Pisa, 2012).

¹³⁷ For information about additional classical and contemporary sources for *Mirra*, see Giuseppe Antonio Camerino, "Il modello tradito. La volontà di fuga e di morte nel linguaggio della *Mirra*," in *Alfieri e il linguaggio della tragedia: Verso, stile, topoi* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1999), 227-244.

the Ovidian Myrrha merely describes to her nurse.¹³⁸ Giuseppe Guido Ferrero writes that this silence, designed as it is to enclose and suppress her illicit love for Ciniro, is often only broken by the heroine's desire for death, "la sola passione che Mirra può confessare."¹³⁹ Mario Fubini affirms that even within the confines of her silence Mirra cannot name the object of her passion.¹⁴⁰ Interested in the ways in which Alfieri achieves a new psychological depth in his heroine, Walter Binni writes that her desire and subsequent descent into catastrophe radiate with the "forza tenace" with which she opposes her passion to the end.¹⁴¹ Thus, for Binni, Mirra's heroism lies in her silence, seen as a heroic but ultimately impossible struggle in a world governed by an insurmountable pessimism that does not however preclude expressions of the most refined and

¹³⁸ In the *Vita*, Alfieri provides an illuminating description of his motivation for transforming Ovid's verses on Myrrha's immoral and all-consuming passion into a tragedy: "A Mirra non avea pensato mai; ed anzi, essa non meno che Bibli, e così ogni altro incestuoso amore, mi si erano sempre mostrate come soggetti non tragediabili. Mi capitò alle mani nelle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio quella caldissima e veramente divina allocuzione di Mirra alla di lei nutrice, la quale mi fece prorompere in lacrime, e quasi un subitaneo lampo mi destò l'idea di porla in tragedia" (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 258-259). In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes that Mirra's silence, tenuously but resolutely maintained throughout the tragedy, dampens the horror of her incestuous desire: "Da nessuna parola della tragedia, fino all'ultime del quint'atto, non potranno certamente trar prova, che questa donzella sia rea di amare piuttosto il padre, che di qualunque altro illecito amore; ed essendo ella rea in una tal guisa sempre dubbiosa, più difficilmente ancora si dimostrerà che ella debba riuscire agli spettatore colpevole, scandalosa, ed odiosa" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 131).

¹³⁹ Ferrero, "Lingua e poesia nelle tragedie alfieriane," in *Annali Alfieriani del Centro Nazionale di Studi Alfieriani*, 180.

¹⁴⁰ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 337. Mario Fubini adds that Mirra would have remained enclosed within her silence were it not for the insistence of the other characters desperate to gain access to her secret (Fubini, 346).

¹⁴¹ Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963*, 175. Walter Binni writes: "Nella lotta di Mirra e nella sua stessa catastrofe (la più tormentata e prolungata delle tragedie alfieriane) risplende pienamente la forza tenace con cui quello spirito puro e nobile, a suo modo eroico pur nella sua delicata fragilità femminile, si oppone sino all'ultimo alla rivelazione della sua passione, rifiutata di concedersi a quella, si sforza di sfuggirle (seppure sapendo che quella non può essere dominate, abolita con un semplice ricorso alla ragione e alla morale) con la morte, e con la morte insieme tenta di liberarsene e si punisce per averne solo pronunciate il terribile nome (Binni, 175-176).

noble humanity.¹⁴² Franco Ferrucci aligns Mirra's silence with Alfieri's own explicitly inexpressible affinity for the tyrants of his tragic works.¹⁴³ He contends that Mirra's silence transforms itself both for Alfieri and the heroine herself into a tacit confession of otherwise inadmissible and incommunicable desires.¹⁴⁴ Concerning himself with Alfieri's representation of silence in his tragic works through the use of suspenseful ellipses and dramatic pauses, Guido Santato writes that Mirra's silence, punctured by words expressive of an internal torment impossible to be admitted in full, leads to "uno psicodramma della parola" in which silence imbues words with tragically charged significance.¹⁴⁵ As this brief survey of critical opinions of Mirra's silence demonstrates, Alfieri founds the tragedy's action on the tension between silence and discourse and on the psychic contrasts to which the heroine is subjected in her adherence to a silence that becomes for her both a prison and refuge. Despite her violent upheavals of spirit

¹⁴² See Binni, "Lettura della *Mirra*" in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963*, 169-193. For similar readings, see also Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana*, 170; and Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 223-224.

¹⁴³ Ferrucci, "Il silenzio di Mirra," 48. For Franco Ferrucci, Mirra is emblematic of Alfieri's own inadmissible affinity for his tyrants. Ferrucci writes that the heroine "esprime come nessun'altra figura alfieriana la situazione senza uscita di questo mondo poetico, teso verso il silenzio, e in grado di esprimere efficacemente solo il silenzio, in quanto ogni parola può svelare la colpa celata" (Ferrucci, 48).

¹⁴⁴ Ferrucci, 48. Cf. Frankel, "Mirra: non silenzio ma rivelazione calcolata," 35-55. Margherita Frankel deviates from most scholars of the tragedy in her assessment of Mirra's silence as deliberately giving way to an "ammissione continua, voluta, calcolata" over the course of the tragic action (Frankel, 36). In this unconventional reading, Mirra is a figure dominated both by her incestuous passion and the desire to consummate that passion through a series of gradual, cunning, but subtle revelations, notwithstanding the resulting infamy. Cf. Alonge, *Mirra l'incestuosa*, 78. Roberto Alonge reads Mirra's admission of her passion as involuntary and insists that Mirra's silence, which is the result of a "grosso sforzo di razionalizzazione per negarsi alla devastazione della sua pulsione incestuosa," is undermined not by the equivocal words the heroine utters but by the "lingua" of her body (Alonge, 78). In his interest in Mirra's unconsciously significant gestures, Alonge engages a line of thought elaborated by numerous critics and scholars, from Francesco de Sanctis in the nineteenth century to Guido Davico Bonino.

¹⁴⁵ Santato, *Tra mito e palinodia*, 29. For an extended look at the psychoanalytic possibilities opened up in *Mirra*, see Carla Forno, "La Mirra di Alfieri fra mito e psicanalisi," in *Impegno e passione: Vent'anni di lavoro del Centro di Studi Alfieriani* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2007), 23-28.

throughout the tragic action, Alfieri strives to have Mirra retain her nobility of character, and innocence, even following her confession at the close of the tragedy. He writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that he hopes spectators will be able to appreciate “la modestia, l’innocenza di cuore, e la forza di carattere di questa Mirra.”¹⁴⁶

With Mirra’s silence so well studied, little new might be said for the ways in which that silence reveals the heroine’s inner turmoil. Instead, this analysis looks at how Mirra and the tragedy’s other characters refer to her silence, address it in words and through their actions, thus irremediably implicating themselves in the fatal pattern of silence and discourse giving thrust to the tragic action and precipitating her final undoing. Although Mirra’s silence leaves none around her unaffected and is instead reinforced by the behaviors and reactions of her parents, nurse, and betrothed, the heroine, as has been noted,¹⁴⁷ reveals a limpid tragic consciousness that guarantees her isolation from the tragedy’s other figures.¹⁴⁸ Given to a tragic perplexity for the first four acts, Mirra’s loved ones only finally arrive at an understanding colored by horror and limited by a lack of empathy in the fifth.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 130.

¹⁴⁷ For some critical analyses of the impact of Mirra’s silence on her loved ones, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 332-350; Binni’s essay “Lettura della *Mirra*,” in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963*, 169-193; and Santato’s chapter “‘Oltre i confini del natural dolore’, Retorica tragica ed esperienza-limite nella *Mirra*,” in *Tra mito e palinodia*, 13-53.

¹⁴⁸ Northrop Frye writes that the “center of tragedy is in the hero’s isolation,” *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 208. Although the tragic women previously analyzed also find themselves isolated from the other characters of their respective tragedies as a result of their silence, it is in Mirra’s complete withdrawal into silence and in her inability to communicate with those around her that Alfieri achieves his most complete depiction of tragic isolation.

¹⁴⁹ Frye argues that tragedy is “much concerned with breaking up the family and opposing it to the rest of society” (Frye, 218). Alfieri, however, takes tragedy’s interest in the dissolution of the family to extremes in *Mirra*. Mirra and her loved ones exist in isolation from society. The palace at Cyprus becomes the site of an entirely domestic tragedy that is hermetically sealed against any intrusion from political or social concerns that might dilute the focus on the intimate family dynamics serving to augment the horror of Mirra’s incestuous desire. Furthermore, it is not Mirra alone who brings about the ruin of her family.

Although it is not uncommon for Alfierian heroes and heroines not to appear until the second act of the tragedy,¹⁵⁰ it is Mirra whose delayed entrance is most notably remarked upon by the other characters.¹⁵¹ Alfieri prepares for and intensifies the dramatic impact of her appearance in Act II by having Euricléa and Cecri discuss her altered state in the first scene of Act I. This will be followed by Cecri's later conversation with Ciniro in the third scene of the same act. Having long observed Mirra's languor and melancholy, Cecri first presses Euricléa to recount to her what she knows of her daughter's affliction. It is significant that Cecri summons the nurse at an hour at which Ciniro is not accustomed to rise,¹⁵² thus cloaking their encounter in secrecy that will soon permeate the entire tragedy until Mirra's disastrous reveal in the final act. In having Cecri exhort Euricléa to narrate ("narrar" [I, 1, v. 4]) what knowledge of her daughter she might possess, Alfieri introduces the antinomic tension between silence and speech that will animate the subsequent tragic action. In other words, in fashioning a representation of an unseen Mirra out of words, Cecri and Euricléa, and later Ciniro, paradoxically silence the heroine through their erroneous

Instead, she is assisted by her father, mother, nurse, and betrothed, who, in unwittingly driving the heroine to confess her illicit passion, participate in the disintegration of the family unit. Mirra's suffering assumes tragic irony as a result of her loved ones' inability to recognize the role they exercise in her, and even their own, undoing. For a reading of the family dynamics of *Mirra*, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 334-335, 348-349. Mario Fubini, however, does not address the complicity of Mirra's family in her suffering. Instead, he argues that with their benignity, Mirra's loved ones reflect an image of happiness that is unattainable for the heroine. Any notion of domestic bliss is unfathomable to a mind consumed by forbidden desires.

¹⁵⁰ Of the women analyzed in this chapter, both Sofonisba and Mirra make their first appearance in the second act of their respective tragedies, while the hero Agamennone does not appear until the second act of his. Another woman who does not appear until the second act of her respective tragedy is Ottavia. She instead appears for the first time, like the figures previously mentioned, in the second act.

¹⁵¹ See Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 129; Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 230-233; and Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri*, 200-202.

¹⁵² "Vieni, o fida Euricléa: sorge ora appena / L'alba; e sì tosto a me venir non suole / Il mio consorte" (I, 1, vv. 1-3).

interpretations that fail to correspond to her actual suffering.¹⁵³ The hidden meaning of her despair, whose signs are nonetheless visibly present on her body, is subordinated to her loved ones' speculations that only ingenuously hover near but never fully arrive at the truth. For Mirra, this leads to a "tragic loneliness" that derives, in the words of Lucien Goldmann, from the "inability of the world even to listen to the sound of a voice speaking genuinely of essence," or of an absolute truth that resists any and all rationalistic compromising.¹⁵⁴ Cecri thus describes to Euricléa the visibly altered Mirra according to this process of silencing:

È ver, ch'io da gran tempo
 Di sua rara beltà languire il fiore
 Veggo: una muta, una ostinata ed alta
 Malinconia mortale appanna in lei
 Quel sì vivido sguardo: e, piangesse ella!...
 Ma, innanzi a me, tacita stassi; e sempre
 Pregno ha di pianto, e asciutti sempre ha il ciglio.
 E invan l'abbraccio; e le chieggo, e richieggo,
 Invano ognor, che il suo dolor mi sveli:
 Niega ella il duol; mentre di giorno in giorno
 Io dal dolor strugger la veggio.

(I, 1, vv. 12-22)

It is a description of Mirra that the nurse will immediately corroborate.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, it reveals Cecri's astute perception of Mirra's silent, deep-rooted, and impenetrable melancholy. Nonetheless, hers remains a superficial perception incapable of illuminating her daughter's dolorous state.

¹⁵³ Giuseppe Antonio Camerino contends that Mirra's melancholy connotes her innocence: "L'infelicità, s'è detto, si coniuga anche con l'innocenza, motivo fondamentale dell'invenzione tragica alfieriana," (Camerino, "Il modello tradito. La volontà di fuga e di morte nel linguaggio della *Mirra*," 233). Camerino argues that this particular dialectic between melancholy, or unhappiness, and innocence contains an autobiographical element, which corresponds to Alfieri's own understanding of his melancholy as derived from a severe, implacable, and ultimately incomprehensible nature (Camerino, 236-238).

¹⁵⁴ Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, 79.

¹⁵⁵ "E s'io le parlo / Del suo dolore, anco a me il niega" (vv. 30-31).

In her study of the polysemic role silence assumes in classical Greek theater, Silvia Montiglio writes that when the vaticinator Cassandra breaks her silence, she does so in a language unintelligible to those around her and yet in a voice intended to “overcompensate” for the sudden lack of that silence.¹⁵⁶ Despite the oracular nature of Cassandra’s silence, which destines her irruptions of speech to go misunderstood, Mirra’s own silence operates in a similar paradox to that of the doomed augur of antiquity. Her silence is ruptured by supplications to her mother and nurse that they accept her denial of any abnormal melancholy, but both Cecri and Euricléa fail to comprehend her invocation of death and repeatedly urge her to provide an explanation that the illicit nature of her passion prevents her from offering. Their insistence that she justify her weeping and spiritual lassitude only results in her more firmly and clearly articulated demands for silence, as indicated by her command to her nurse to speak no more of the matter.¹⁵⁷ If in *Antigone* Argia’s desire to perform the burial rites for the slain Polinice alongside Antigone obliged the heroine to voice more precisely and powerfully her own heroism, here in *Mirra* an opposite effect is achieved. Instead, in pressing Mirra to speak, Cecri and Euricléa consequently silence her: they unknowingly require that she mask her need for secrecy behind increasingly vocal demands for discretion and

¹⁵⁶ Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 216. “Two aspects of Cassandra’s silence apply more generally to the tragic representation of silence. First, breaking silence does not mean making contact; on the contrary, the silent character moves from silence to an incomprehensible and solitary language. Second, silence gives way to a resonant and exuberant voice that overcompensates for its absence” (Montiglio, 216).

¹⁵⁷ Euricléa narrates to Cecri her coming upon a weeping Mirra:

Ma, ferma
Sempre in negar, dicea; ch’ogni donzella,
Per le vicine nozze, alquanto è oppressa
Di passeggera doglia; e a me il comando
Di tacervelo dava

(I, 1, vv. 102-106)

solitude that are never grasped in their most intimate sense. In so doing, both women manage to deepen the heroine's isolation and knowledge of her passion's iniquity.

Throughout Act I, Alfieri carefully delineates the features of Mirra's silence and juxtaposes her reticence with that adopted by her loved ones in their efforts to probe her silence for meaning. For example, Euricléa describes hearing Mirra weep and intone the word "morte" while feigning sleep and believing herself to go unheard:

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;'

(I, 1, vv. 77-84)

Cecri's earlier description of Mirra's taciturn mood focused most prominently on the altered state of her daughter's beauty. Euricléa, instead, draws attention to the sounds of Mirra's silence, the irruptions of sighing and weeping that momentarily perforate an otherwise intractable reticence. The nurse emphasizes her sighs, here described as "sepolti quasi," "pochi," and "rotti," which escalate in a crescendo of audible but inarticulate despair. Thus Mirra's sighs soon become "pianto dirottissimo," then "singhiozzi," and finally "alte strida," before giving way to the single word "morte," the only desire to which the heroine can give precise expression. From her ruptured silence and later intimation of sorrow at her impending nuptials, typical of young brides, Euricléa concludes: "Il volto, e gli atti, / E i suoi sospiri, e il suo silenzio, ah! tutto / Mel dice assai, ch'ella Peréo non ama" (I, 1, vv. 125-127). The conclusion is accurate, but in its inability to penetrate entirely Mirra's melancholic state, governed by immoral and unutterable desires, it transforms itself into a competing narrative that will provide the coordinates for all future interrogations of

Mirra on the part of the tragedy's other characters. Thus it will reinforce the heroine's need for silence when she is increasingly pressed to confirm this narrative that does not ever allow for the reveal of her passion's true object. She is therefore further drawn into isolation and silenced as a result of these efforts to circumscribe her unspeakable desire in words.

In addition to keenly delineating the external aspects of Mirra's silence, as related through the observations and concerns of her mother and nurse, Alfieri takes care to distinguish the heroine's silent behaviors and insistence on secrecy from her loved ones' own acts of concealment occurring parallel to them. As previously seen, Cecri summons Euricléa to her presence at an early hour so as to avoid Ciniro, and Euricléa herself recounts silently overhearing Mirra's nocturnal weeping until after months of such nightly occurrences she rushes to the heroine's side and inadvertently earns her anguished rebuke.¹⁵⁸ This discretion is further expressed in Cecri's command to Euricléa to return to Mirra's chamber without, however, relating to her their private encounter: "Or va; presso lei torna; / E non le dir, che favellato m'abbi" (I, 1, vv. 152-153). The order immediately prompts Euricléa's fear that in her absence from Mirra's side the heroine in her solitude has immersed herself once more in her despair.¹⁵⁹ In addition, Cecri herself declines to appear by her daughter's bedside as a comfort, desiring to provoke "nè timor, nè doglia" in a girl so "pieghevola, timida, e modesta / Che nessuno mezzo è mai benigno troppo" (I, 1, vv. 167-170). Alfieri nonetheless undermines the women's furtive acts and insistence on discretion with Ciniro's later admission to Cecri, in the final scene of Act 1, that he forced Euricléa to disclose to him

¹⁵⁸ "Mi dice: 'A che ne vieni? or via, che vuoi?...'" (I, 1, v. 91).

¹⁵⁹ "Chi sa, se mentre
Io così a lungo teco favellava,
Chi sa, se nel feroce impeto stesso
Di dolor non ricadde?"

(I, 1, vv. 157-160)

details of their secret meeting: “Udito in breve ho il tutto; / Euricléa di svelarmelo costrinsi” (I, 3, vv. 186-187). It is one reveal in a series of reveals that occur throughout the tragic action as Alfieri differentiates between willing and coerced revelation. While Mirra struggles with a passion unable to be encapsulated in words, her parents and nurse are untroubled by similar immoral desires and so find that their secrecy and silence are both easily overturned. If, as Mario Fubini states, the heroine is unable to remove herself from the “vigile affetto dei familiari, il cui sguardo è costantemente posato su di lei,” and whose unremitting questions only augment her suffering and drive her ever more irresistibly to the ruinous confession of her desire for Ciniro,¹⁶⁰ then that same circle of loved ones serves an additional purpose within the economy of the tragedy, one that subtly and yet cruelly engages some of the same mechanisms by which she endeavors to keep her illicit passion hidden. By drawing attention to Mirra’s silence, and by attempting ingenuously to frame in words what for the heroine is unspeakable, all the while enmeshing themselves in a pattern of concealment and revelation that only highlights the unutterable nature of her desire, the tragedy’s other figures render the pain of her isolation all the more acute and make more clearly manifest the tragic coherence of a mind cognizant, in contrast with the others, of the necessity for silence and the consequences of breaking it. Thus the contours of Mirra’s tragedy, a tragedy enacted beyond the comprehension of the other characters, come to be more sharply defined. Delimited by these contours, her solitude is concurrently rendered all the more absolute and impenetrable.

This pattern of concealment and revelation continues in Ciniro’s interrogation of Peréo in Act II. It is here that the guileless young prince transforms himself into the obverse of Mirra in his

¹⁶⁰ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 346.

candid admission of his suffering at what he perceives to be his betrothed's lack of affection for him.¹⁶¹ Ciniro's invitation for Peréo to speak reinforces this transformation:

Di vera fiamma
Ardi, il veggo, per Mirra; e oltraggio grave
Ti farei, dubitandone. Ma,... dimmi;...
Se indiscreto il mio chieder non è troppo,...
Sei parimente riamato?

(II, 1, vv. 29-33)

His invitation also serves as an additional confirmation of the cognitive remoteness of Mirra's own secret passion from the understanding of the other characters. Furthermore, the tragedy's chiasmic structure is revealed in Ciniro's capacity to read in Peréo the signs of a burning passion and his subsequent incapacity to achieve a similar successful reading in his own daughter. Indeed, the king apprehends Peréo's love for Mirra and takes care to be "indiscreto" when posing the question of his daughter's regard for the prince. Crucially, however, he will be unable to encourage Mirra similarly to speak and only manages to grasp her incestuous passion after the series of increasingly heightened provocations in Act V breaks her resolve, forcing her to utter the name of her illicit desire. Peréo's willingness to speak,¹⁶² to admit his doubts about Mirra's affections, and to give passionate vent to his own personal torment,¹⁶³ contrasts with the heroine's increasingly frangible silence. Scholars have not often explicitly addressed Alfieri's use of irony in *Mirra*.¹⁶⁴ Yet the

¹⁶¹ Guglielminetti, *Saul e Mirra*, 76.

¹⁶² "...Io nulla / Celar ti debbo" (II, 1, vv. 33-34).

¹⁶³ "Deh! fossi / Vittima almeno di dolor tanto io solo!" (II, 1, vv. 70-71).

¹⁶⁴ Applicable to Alfieri's use of irony in *Mirra* and to the heroine's own situation as both guilty and innocent throughout the tragedy might be Northrop Frye's description of the figure subjected to tragic irony, referred to as a *pharmakos*: "The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shouts bring down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. The two facts do not come together; they remain ironically apart. The *pharmakos*, in short, is in the situation of Job. Job can defend himself again

transparency with which Ciniro and Peréo dialogue with each other ironically points to the opaqueness of Mirra's own psyche. Furthermore, the ease with which Ciniro and Peréo discuss matters of love indicates their tragic inefficacy; they, along with Ceci and Euricléa, fail to grasp the greater dimensions of the tragedy in which they take part and unwittingly effect to precipitate Mirra's demise through their incomprehension of her torment. Ciniro's response to Peréo further evinces the tragic limit to their understanding:

Pietà mi fai, quanto la figlia.... Il tuo
 Franco e caldo parlare un'alma svela
 Umana ed alta: io ti credea ben tale;
 Quindi men franco non mi udrai parlarti.—
 Per la mia figlia io tremo.

(II, 1, vv. 72-76)

By positively associating Peréo's "alma" with his "franco e caldo parlare," Ciniro demonstrates, once more, the limitations of his character. His appreciation of Peréo's speech will devolve into horror once Mirra subverts her silence when she finally discloses the object of her tortured affections in the tragedy's final act. Alfieri has Ciniro's words to Peréo reverberate with intimations of this catastrophe:

Il duol d'amante
 Divido io teco; ah! prence, il duol di padre
 Meco dividi tu. S'ella infelice
 Per mia cagion mai fosse!

the charge of having done something that make his catastrophe morally intelligible; but the success of his defense makes it morally unintelligible" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 41-42). The dialectic tension that Frye establishes between intelligibility and unintelligibility is particularly relevant in the case of Mirra, whose iniquitous passion comes to be morally condemned by both Ciniro and Ceci despite remaining unrealized through to the end of the tragedy. Thus, Mirra's catastrophe is morally intelligible only to her parents, while for the heroine herself it is the result of an ultimately inexplicable paradox, wherein her efforts to maintain her innocence are made, in part through the intervention of her loved ones, to lead to her confession of guilt. The fact that this guilt is ambiguous, and made to coincide with her innocence, adds to the moral unintelligibility produced by the tragedy's final act. Frye, furthermore, aligns tragedy with irony, noting that the two genres are closely related, particularly in what he terms "low mimetic tragedy." In Frye's cyclical evolution and devolution of literary modes, irony in low mimetic tragedy links tragedy to realism and yet returns the former genre to the rituals and deities typical of high mimetic tragedy. For an extended discussion, see Frye, 35-43.

(II, 1, vv. 76-79)

In expressing his dismay at the thought of being the cause of Mirra's unhappiness, Ciniro unknowingly reveals himself to be the principal actor in the heroine's tragedy. Unbeknownst to him, speech becomes burdened with meaning that defies comprehension, as here Alfieri exposes the limits of discourse and undermines its efficacy as a vehicle for tragic communication. The tragic gravity of Ciniro's words lies not in their superficial meaning but in the meaning that goes unheard and is thus for the king silent.

Oblivious of his central role in her despair, Ciniro fails to recognize Mirra's individuality. Believing her silence capable of being overturned on the basis of his dialogue with Peréo, he encourages the prince to meet with his daughter and induce her to speak through the confession of his love.¹⁶⁵ Ciniro's strategy is laced with tragic incomprehension confirmed in his inability to conceive of a heart "in più fiamma acceso" (II, 1, 95) than Peréo's itself.

However, the prince undertakes this strategy in the following scene. In his encounter with Mirra, he offers up an observant reading of her reticence that once again fails to arrive completely at its source:

Ardita, e franca
Parlami, dunque. – Ma, tu immobile taci?...
Disdegno e morte il tuo silenzio spira....
Chiara è risposta il tuo tacer: mi abborri;

¹⁶⁵ "Peréo, chi udirti senza pianger puote?...
Cor, nè il più fido, nè in più fiamma acceso
Del tuo, non v'ha. Deh! come a me l'apristi,
Così il dischiudi anco alla figlia: udirti,
E non ti aprire anch'ella il cor, son certo,
Che nol potrà. Non la cred'io pentita;
(Chi il fora, conoscendoti?) ma trarle
Potrai dal petto la cagion tu forse
Del nascosto suo male."

(II, 1, vv. 94-102)

E dir non l'osi....

(II, 2, vv. 128-132)

Although recognizing the desire for death which motivates Mirra's silence, Peréo mistakenly believes that it derives, in addition, from her disdain for him as Alfieri once more demonstrates the tragic solipsism of the tragedy's other characters, who read Mirra's silence through their own limited understanding and in strict relation to rigidly enforced social roles (father, mother, betrothed, nurse). As the tragedy progresses, these roles prove idealistic and untenable until they are completely subverted by Mirra's confession of her incestuous passion.

Though tormented by her unspeakable desire, Mirra intelligently responds to Peréo:

L'accesa
Tua fantasia ti spigne oltre ai confini
Del vero. Io taccio al tuo parlar novello;
Qual meraviglia?

(II, 2, vv. 139-142)

She continues:

ma, spesse volte
La mestizia è natura; e mal potrebbe
Darne ragion chi in sè l'acchiude: e spesso
Quell'ostinato interrogar d'altrui,
Senza chiarirne il fonte, in noi l'addoppia.

(II, 2, vv. 149-153)

Cognizant of Peréo's narrow, though not entirely unsuccessful, apprehension of her silence, and alone of the tragedy's characters aware of what her silence conceals, she reproaches the young man for participating in the "ostinato interrogar d'altrui" that merely strengthens her need to keep silent. In her reference to her silent state, which both alludes to the act of staying silent and to her awareness of the mechanisms reinforcing its underlying melancholy, Mirra makes manifest the

capacity for self-knowledge denied to her loved ones and by which, as a result, her sense of isolation is heightened.

Nonetheless, she remains, to a degree greater than either Antigone or Clitennestra, aware of the limitations of this self-knowledge. She admits that her ability to withhold from Peréo her otherwise inexpressible desires correlates to her own ability to withhold such knowledge from herself:

Nè asconder cosa a te potrei, . . . se pria
 Non l'ascondessi anco a me stessa. Or prego;
 Chi m'ama il più, di questa mia tristezza
 Il men mi parli, e svanirà, son certa.

(II, 2, vv. 187-190)

In her acknowledgment of a sadness whose source she herself endeavors to repress, Mirra imposes a double silence on herself; within the recesses of her tortured mind, she refuses to indulge in the secret passion that she keeps hidden from everyone else. At the same time, in seeking to dissuade Peréo from further attempting to break her silence, she demonstrates a keen understanding of the tragic forces threatening her demise and raises the possibility of her own inability to impose silence on those around her. However, she continues to believe, in vain, that in a silence maintained by both herself and others she might be spared the full horror of her secret passion. It was this horror that Alfieri was determined to spare the audience until the tragedy's end so as to make sure that his heroine did not appear "colpevole, scandalosa, ed odiosa," as he writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 131.

Nonetheless, Mirra finds herself incapable of maintaining a hold on her silence. Prompted by Peréo's suspicion of her request to depart for Epiro immediately following their nuptials,¹⁶⁷ she catches the underlying significance of her betrothed's use of the verb "abbandonare" and involuntarily breaks into speech: "Il vo';... per sempre / Abbandonarli,... e morir.... di dolore...." (II, 2, vv. 208-209). It is through this spontaneous irruption of a psyche acted upon by an unrelenting and immoral passion that she admits, despite herself, her inability to outrun the secret tormenting her. Death, instead, will be the inevitable result of the flight from her father's kingdom on Cipro. In her instinctive response to Peréo, she repeats the verb "abbandonare" which contains meaning perceivable to her alone: the abandonment of her desire's unnamable object from which resulting sorrow she will die. Here Alfieri demonstrates how the tragedy's other characters indulge in speech that communicates on a level perceptible to Mirra alone. In the act's final scene, the heroine confirms the antinomy between communicability and incommunicability when she solicits Euricléa to ignore her previous demand that the nurse supply her with a dagger so that she might take her life: "A un cor dolente / Sfuggon parole, a cui badar non vuolsi" (II, 4, vv. 322-323). Aware of their potential to undermine her silence, she attempts to denude her words of the meaning she alone grasps in its entirety. In addition, Euricléa's resulting wordless astonishment¹⁶⁸ is not the silence she earlier sought to impose on Peréo, becoming, instead, the type of speechlessness shaded by horror that the heroine will continue to produce in other characters as they approach, ever more perilously, her tragic secret.

¹⁶⁷ "Il patrio suol, gli almi parenti, / Tanto t'incresce abbandonare; e vuoi / Ratta così, per sempre?" (II, 2, vv. 206-208).

¹⁶⁸ Mirra narrates her nurse's astonished reaction: "Immobil,... muta,... appena / Respiri!" (II, 4, vv. 308-309).

In Act III, Alfieri deepens the cognitive dissonance of Mirra's loved ones, who persist in interrogating her, heedless of the consequences. While Cecri is able to recognize that her daughter does not bear any love for Peréo and that marriage would result in her death,¹⁶⁹ neither she nor Ciniro manages to view Mirra as capable of brooding over a secret that defies both their comprehension and authority as parents to know.¹⁷⁰ Although Ciniro insists that both he and Cecri act in Mirra's best interests, he lacks the capacity to admit that he might be unable to overcome her reticence, to possess knowledge that refuses to be shared. Mirra's silence calls into question Ciniro and Cecri's authority as parents and exposes its limits. However, they refuse to desist in their attempts to induce their daughter to speak. Brought before her parents and dismayed at the unexpected presence of her father,¹⁷¹ Mirra is encouraged to disclose the reason for her silence.

Ciniro states:

Or, del tuo fero stato
Se disvelarne la cagion ti piace,
Vita ci dai; ma, se il tacerla pure
Più ti giova o ti aggrade, anco tacerla,
Figlia, tu puoi; che il tuo piacer fia il nostro.

(III, 2, vv. 25-29)

¹⁶⁹ “Ella non l’ama; / Certezza io n’ebbi; e andando ella a tai nozze, / Corre (pur troppo!) ad infallibil morte” (III, 1, vv. 3-5).

¹⁷⁰ Indeed, Ciniro declares:

Ch’ella omai chiuda
In ciò il suo core a noi, del tutto parmi
Impossibile; a noi, che di noi stessi,
Non che di sè, la femmo arbitra e donna

(III, 1, vv. 11-14)

¹⁷¹ “Oh ciel! che veggo? / Anco il padre!...” (III, 2, vv. 20-21).

However, his generous offer to Mirra either to reveal the cause of her “fero stato” or to keep it concealed without any negative consequences will be undermined by the progression of the tragic action,¹⁷² and by Peréo’s suicide revealed in the fifth act, in particular. Once more, Ciniro’s speech echoes with meaning imperceptible to either him or Cecri, as it touches on Mirra’s “piacer” without identifying its object, in what amounts to an unwitting but no less cruel test of the heroine’s resolve to keep silent.

Ciniro later adds:

Da cagion vile esser non puoi tu mossa;
 L’indole nobil tua, gli alti tuoi sensi,
 E l’amor tuo per noi, ci è noto il tutto:
 Di te, del sangue tuo cosa non degna,
 Nè pur pensarla puoi.

(III, 2, vv. 43-47)

As elsewhere in the tragedy, Ciniro through his speech constructs an overly idealistic vision of Mirra despite the genuine paternal solicitude underlying his words. Unable to conceive of the “cagion vile” possibly motivating her reticence, and yet drawing attention to it through his own negation of it, he both tempts Mirra to speak and encourages her to remain silent as he unsuspectingly prompts her to dwell on the “non degna” nature of her secret and “l’amor” not permissible within the domain of traditional familial affections. Through the figure of Ciniro, Alfieri reveals his interest in semantic antithesis, in imbuing speech with unintended and unopenly expressed meaning made to resonate in the spaces existing between the words and in the silence into which Mirra’s brachylogies devolve.

¹⁷² In a reading of this passage, Roberto Alonge argues that Ciniro refuses to exercise his role as father and acts overly indulgently with Mirra. This rejection of patriarchal institutions and traditional familial roles leads to tragic confusion for the heroine, as Mirra is encouraged to view in Ciniro a figure who does not follow paternal patterns of behavior. Therefore, both the hope and fear commingled in her illicit desires are heightened. See Alonge, *Mirra l’incestuosa*, particularly pages 50-71.

In his idealistic insistence on a morality that Mirra with her iniquitous desire can no longer possess, Ciniro attempts to suppress the heroine's tragedy while simultaneously giving that same tragedy impetus. Mirra is therefore led to admit of her sorrow, her "duol," which Ciniro and Cecri compel her to acknowledge:

Oltre i confini
Del natural dolore il mio trascorre;
Invan lo ascondo; e a voi vorrei pur dirlo, ...
Ove il sapessi io stessa

(III, 2, vv. 71-74)

The heroine confesses both to a sorrow whose dimensions trespass the boundaries of a more "natural dolore," hinting at its illicit nature, and her own failure to contain it. There follows the vain hope that she might be able to divulge the source of her sorrow to her parents, but Mirra understands that a disclosure of the torment animating her silence would necessitate her complete understanding of its immoral scope and unequivocal acceptance of it. It is to the brink of this understanding and acceptance that her parents bring her and from which she nevertheless continues to recoil, declaring: "Poichè maggior del mio dolore io sono, / Siatel pur voi" (III, 2, vv. 145-146). However, the specter of tragic recognition hovers throughout the scene as Ciniro exclaims: "Un po' mi acqueta / Il tuo parlar; ma tremo..." (III, 2, vv. 150-151). Conversely, Mirra, strengthened by her newfound resolve to master her sorrow, replies: "In me più forte / Tornar mi sento, in favellarvi" (III, 2, vv. 151-152); and further demonstrates the antithetical forces separating her from her loved ones. Induced to speak and cloak her secret passion in words meant to evade and ultimately repress its vile nature, she draws strength from this successful rupturing of her silence and falsely comes to believe herself capable of wielding control over the tragedy's discourse. Nonetheless, her speech intimates a horror that silences Ciniro, notwithstanding his failure to illuminate its obscure depths. Even through the employment of speech meant to preserve her

parents from the dreadfulness of her passion, Mirra manages to alienate herself further from her loved ones, as both speech and silence come to constitute together the forces of her own psychic estrangement, leaving her with no possibility to assuage her despair.

Alfieri juxtaposes to Mirra's incomplete admission of her sorrow Cecri's confession to Ciniro, in the act's following scene, of her "parlar superbo" (III, 3, v. 233) at Venere's expense and to which she attributes the cause of their daughter's incongruous melancholy.¹⁷³ Cecri admits the indiscreet speech with which she angered the goddess, i.e. her boast that Mirra's beauty drew more people to Cipro than the latter's sacred cult. Although the role of Venere in the tragedy has been minimized,¹⁷⁴ Cecri's confession heightens the antinomic relationship between speech and silence, in whose paradoxes and inconsistencies the heroine's isolation and alienation are ensured. Ciniro reproves his wife for her double error both in offending the goddess and in withholding from him knowledge of the offense: "Mal festi, o donna; e fu il tacermel, peggio" (III, 3, v. 258). Despite her absence in the scene, Mirra's presence is still strongly felt, as Ciniro's condemnation of his wife's silence will later contrast with his horrified condemnation of his daughter's own confession at the tragedy's close. This paradox governs Mirra's relationship with her loved ones throughout the tragic action, which is founded on a series of contradictions that render her final capitulation to speech inevitable. For Ciniro and Cecri, Mirra's tragedy is inscribed within the goddess's vendetta and is the result of improper speech. While still the result of improper speech, the heroine's actual tragedy is the result of a horror that is for her parents inconceivable and for her still unspeakable. Ciniro and Cecri's miscomprehension will prove fatal for Mirra, since it will

¹⁷³ "...Ah! ben conosco, / Cruda implacabil Venere, le atroci / Tue vendette" (III, 3, vv. 230-232).

¹⁷⁴ For one such reading, see Guglielminetti, *Saul e Mirra*, 50-60.

finally force her to confront this horror.¹⁷⁵ Despite the inevitability of this confrontation, Alfieri locates the heroine's resistance in her unique awareness of the contradictions by which her loved ones implicate themselves in her undoing.¹⁷⁶ To a degree greater than Alfieri's other tragic women, Mirra possesses an intimate understanding of not only her own role within the tragedy but, so too, the role the other characters play in her demise and from which knowledge they are completely excluded.

In Act IV, with her nuptials approaching, Mirra finds herself able to exercise increasingly less control over a mind from which erupts subconscious impulses to speak. In her final meeting with Peréo before they are to be wed, she reiterates her plan to depart immediately from Cipro and begs the prince never to recall to her either her parents or her homeland left behind. Earlier, she had consoled her parents with the fictive vision of her eventual return to Cipro with grandchildren to support them in their declining years.¹⁷⁷ Instead, with Peréo, she rejects any suggestion of a possible reappearance in the "paterna / Lasciata reggia" (IV, 2, vv. 67-68), and in her desperation seeks to impose silence on her betrothed.¹⁷⁸ It is both an act of resistance to an iniquitous desire

¹⁷⁵ Camerino, "La volontà di fuga e di morte nel linguaggio della *Mirra*," 231. Giuseppe A. Camerino writes that a motivating factor in Mirra's silence is her desire to flee from herself, since she embodies the "impossibile conciliazione tra condizione dell'uomo e processi della natura" by which her passion proves beyond her strength to control (Camerino, 231).

¹⁷⁶ Roberto Alonge notes, for example, that Ciniro only comprehends the nature of Mirra's crime at the moment of her suicide. Alonge writes: "È l'azione di Mirra, la sua scelta di uccidersi, che rompe gli indugi, che chiarisce con la forza del gesto ciò che Ciniro non riesce ancora a chiarirsi" (Alonge, *Mirra l'incestuosa*, 99).

¹⁷⁷ "Di molti figli e cari
Me lieta madre rivedrete in Cipro,
Se li concedono i Numi: e, qual più a grado
A voi sarà tra i figli miei, sostegno
Vel lasceremo ai vostri anni canuti."

(III, 2, vv. 181-185)

¹⁷⁸ Guglielminetti, *Saul e Mirra*, 62.

and an acknowledgment of that same desire's permanence for which any remedy can only be palliative but never curative. Silence thus constitutes for Mirra a sort of tragic stopgap that far from correcting her illicit passion merely stems its progression, and only temporarily and imperfectly. Her growing realization of the ultimate failure of her silence coincides with her weakening ability to frustrate her subconscious inclinations toward incriminating speech. In addition, such a realization coincides with her continued heroic resolve to adopt silence, despite its limitations, as the sole means of averting ruin. Her desire for death, echoed throughout the tragedy, is also a desire for silence taken to extremes and considered by the heroine as the way through which silence can be most successfully implemented. While Antigone and Sofonisba seek a public death as a preventive measure against infamy, and as the means by which to attain glory, Mirra instead pursues an annihilative death, one intended to stamp out and destroy all traces of a secret and immoral passion unsustainable in a living body.¹⁷⁹

Her desire for death, and her mounting desperation at her inability to obtain it, animate her ultimately suspended nuptials to Peréo. Here her body, having previously acted independently of a will bent on suppressing its revelatory gestures, cedes ever more completely to her subconscious.¹⁸⁰ As the chorus sings around her,¹⁸¹ Mirra involuntarily betrays signs of an overwhelming despair. Both Euricléa and Cecri comment on her trembling and altered facial expressions. Attempting in vain to silence them, Mirra admonishes her mother:

Ah! per pietà, coi detti
Non cimentar la mia costanza, o madre:
Del sembiante non so;... ma il cor, la mente,

¹⁷⁹ Masiello, *L'ideologia tragica di Vittorio Alfieri*, 248.

¹⁸⁰ For a look at Mirra's gestures and how they "speak" the secrets of her subconscious, see Alonge, *Mirra l'incestuosa*, 78-85.

¹⁸¹ For an analysis of Alfieri's depiction of the chorus in *Mirra*, see Guglielminetti, *Saul e Mirra*, 64-68.

Salda stommi, immutabile.

(IV, 3, vv. 158-164)

Mirra realizes that Cecri's and Euricl a's interjections undermine her resolve to see the marriage through to completion. Subject to two competing forces, she reveals herself to be the site of a paradox in which perfect knowledge of psychic frailty coexists alongside the spontaneous gestural effusions of a body tested beyond its limits. Her reprimand to her mother is a testament to her understanding of her exclusion from a domestic environment in which maternal concern does not precipitate ruin, of her complete alienation from traditional familial discourse now suffused with inimical significance. Alfieri's emphasis on Mirra's revealing gestures as noted by the other characters allows him to posit the failure of silence, its inability to be totalizing, and to seal her complete isolation from the circle of her loved ones. Already betrayed by her body, Mirra, overcome not simply by her despair but by the commentary of the other characters who have apprehended it and destroyed her illusion of control, gives way to an instinctive admission of her psychic turmoil:

gi  nel mio cor, gi  tutte
 Le Furie ho in me tremendo. Eccole; intorno
 Col vipereo flagella e l'atre faci
 Stan le rabide Erinni.

(IV, 3, vv. 176-179)

Her words bring the nuptials to a halt, effectively silencing everyone present, including the chorus. It is yet another contradiction by which the tragic action is organized, as Mirra manages to effect a silence, but one that is unintended. While the quieted nuptial hymns signal for Ciniro merely the vexing cessation of the marriage ceremony upon which she had vocally insisted despite her parents' doubts, for Mirra, the interrupted marriage with Per o and the silencing of the chorus dispel any illusions of her capacity to exercise control over silence and speech, signify her

increasing subjection to the involuntary impulses of her embattled psyche, and thus anticipate the culmination of self-knowledge with which the tragedy concludes.

Following the failed nuptials, her speech grows increasingly opaque and yet likewise transparent as she is driven toward her final confession by the unrelenting intercession of her parents. When Ciniro, his earlier paternal generosity devolving into a patriarchal exercise of firmness, declares that the time has come to employ severity towards Mirra,¹⁸² her response makes apparent the suffusion of language with otherwise inexpressible desire: “È ver: Ciniro meco / Inesorabil sia; null’altro io bramo” (IV, 5, vv. 217-219).¹⁸³ It is as Michel Foucault states; for Mirra, “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say.”¹⁸⁴ Despite the invitation to psychoanalytical readings of *Mirra*, which previous scholars have not ignored,¹⁸⁵ prompted by the heroine’s silence and the ways in which her psyche undermines it, the interest here lies in Alfieri’s eventual nullification of any distinction between silence and discourse in the tragedy. It is this nullification of which Mirra alone is aware and which results in tragic miscomprehension for the other characters. Thus, at the close of the fourth act, having sought in vain her death at the hands of Cecri, Mirra gives expression to her silent antipathy toward her mother and rival: “Tu prima, tu sola, / Tu sempiternal cagione funesta / D’ogni miseria mia....”

¹⁸² “Se pria / Noi severi non fummo, è giunto il giorno / D’esserlo al fine” (IV, 5, vv. 215-217).

¹⁸³ Alonge, *Mirra l’incestuosa*, 81-83.

¹⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 27. Given psychoanalytic scaffolding, Foucault’s analysis of the proliferation of deviant sexualities as a result of the deliberate intrusion of power on the body offers an intriguing juxtaposition with *Mirra*. In the tragedy, the eponymous heroine’s perverse love is not revealed until the end; yet threaded through each character’s discourse, or lapses into silence, is the truth of this passion, as Alfieri, similarly to Foucault, collapses the distinctions between silence and speech so that both paradoxically lead to the same end, or the revelation of Mirra’s illicit desire. In other words, there is no hiding behind silence.

¹⁸⁵ For an entry into the many psychanalytic readings of Alfierian tragedy, see Forno, “Lettura psicanalitica dell’opera alfieriana. Alcuni esempi,” in *Impegno e passione*, 49-56.

(IV, 7, vv. 289-291). Nonetheless, lost as a consequence of Alfieri's fusion of effable and ineffable discourses, she remains, simultaneously, entirely cognizant of this psychic disorientation, as she explains to Cecri:

Tu, sì; de' mali miei cagione
Fosti, nel dar vita ad un'empia; e il sei,
S'or di tormela nieghi; or, ch'io ferventi
Prieghi ten porgo. Ancor n'è tempo; ancora
Sono innocente, quasi.... – Ma, ... non regge
A tante furie.... il languente.... mio.... corpo....
Mancano i piè,... mancano.... i sensi....

(IV, 7, vv. 296-302)

In Act V, the total loss of Mirra's control over her powers of speech and restraint is realized; her appreciation of the paradox resulting from the confrontation between speech and silence, in which her loved ones participate, reaches its fullest extent. Knowledge of Peréo's suicide following the disrupted nuptials prompts Ciniro in his exasperation to reproach his daughter for her intractable reticence:

Il tuo più grave
Fallo, è il tacer col padre tuo: lo sdegno
Quindi appien tu ne merti; e che in me cessi
L'immenso amor, che all'unica mia figlia
Io già portai.

(V, 2, vv. 53-57)

As has been the case throughout the tragedy, Ciniro communicates what is beyond his ability to understand, again tempting Mirra to break her silence and yield to the immoral passion compelling her to an explicit confession. Aware of this contradiction to which Ciniro remains oblivious, and fearing the loss of a love which for her has become predominately erotic, Mirra exclaims: "Ah!... peggior.... d'ogni morte..." (V, 2, v. 60). Alfieri invests this contradiction with greater tragic

energy by having Ciniro persist in his interrogation of Mirra. His speech becomes increasingly precise as he insists that his daughter's condition stems from a concealed love:

Voglio, qual de' padre ingannato e offeso,
 Da te sapere (e ad ogni costo io 'l voglio)
 La cagion vera di sì orribil danno. –
 Mirra, invan me l'ascondi: ah! ti tradisce
 Ogni tuo menom'atto. – Il parlar rotto;
 Lo impallidire, e l'arrossire; il muto
 Sospirar grave; il consumarsi a lento
 Fuoco il tuo corpo; e il sogguardar tremante;
 E il confonderti incerta; e il vergognarti,
 Che mai da te non si scompagna:... ah! tutto.
 Sì, tutto in te mel dice, e invan tu il nieghi;...
 Son figlie in te le furie tue.... d'amore.

(V, 2, vv. 85-96)

Despite Ciniro's capacity to read in Mirra's trembling gestures, broken speech, and alternation between flushing and pallor, among other signs, evidence of privately nursed affections, the greater significance of these signs lies beyond his comprehension. However, it is Mirra who understands this paradox transforming her father's discourse into a source of torture: "Oimè!... che pensi?... / Non vuoi col brando uccidermi;... e coi detti.... / Mi uccidi intanto...." (V, 2, vv. 101-103). With Ciniro refusing to desist in his unwitting attempts to undermine her strength of will, she adds: "Vuoi dunque.... / Farmi.... al tuo aspetto.... morir.... di vergogna?... / E tu sei padre?" (V, 2, vv. 112-114). For Mirra, with silence having fused inextricably with discourse, there are no longer any means by which to circumvent the confession to which both her reticence and speech impel her. Incapable of viewing silence as the refuge it had earlier appeared, and incited by her father's provocations, she admits:

Oh cielo!....
 Amo, sì; Poichè a dirtelo mi sforzi;
 Io disperatamente amo, ed indarno.
 Ma, qual ne sia l'oggetto, nè tu mai,
 Nè persona il saprà: lo ignora ei stesso....

Ed a me quasi io 'l niego.

(V, 2, vv. 137-142)

Having revealed to Ciniro that her despair derives from an impossible passion, and yet denying the object of that passion both to her father and still to herself, Mirra mounts one final resistance to Ciniro's unremitting paternal interrogation, aware that the confession of her love, to which she finds herself irresistibly driven, coincides with complete knowledge of its iniquity. Thus, in the final act of the tragedy, discourse is brought to its limits. In Ciniro's absurd supplication of Mirra to speak following her admission of a secret passion,¹⁸⁶ Alfieri presents a discourse rendered so incomprehensible that in its unintelligibility for the king, entirely unsuspecting of the response he is forcing his daughter to give, it is actually silenced. Yet concurrent to this obscuration of language is its complete elucidation for Mirra, who perceives in the meaning silently and unknowingly communicated by Ciniro the full extent of her secret passion's immorality, as she reveals: "Ah! non è vile;... è iniqua / La mia fiamma; nè mai..." (V, 2, vv. 165-166). From here she cannot retreat. Instead, she is made completely aware of the inescapable paradox driving the tragic action and her own ruin: both her silence and her speech condemn her. She is therefore forced to give an unequivocal confession of her love for Ciniro. With her father still incompletely grasping the truth of her secret passion and threatening to withdraw his love for her,¹⁸⁷ in her desperation, and compelled by her irrepressible desire, Mirra finally achieves perfect communication with him and confesses:

¹⁸⁶ "Te ne scongiuro, parla: io ti vo' salva, / Ad ogni costo mio" (V, 2, vv. 156-157).

¹⁸⁷ "Ingrata: omai
Col disperarmi co' tuoi modi, e farti
Del mio dolore gioco, omai per sempre
Perduto hai tu l'amor del padre."

(V, 2, vv. 174-177)

Oh dura,
 Fera orribil minaccia!... Or, nel mio estremo
 Sospir, che già si appressa,... alle tante altre
 Furie mie l'odio crudo aggiungerassi
 Del genitor?... Da te morire io lungi?...
 Oh madre mia felice!... almen concesso
 A lei sarà.... di morire.... al tuo fianco....

(V, 2, vv. 177-183)

Although Mirra quickly attempts to retract her confession in one of the many denials interspersed throughout the tragic action, there is no recourse left to her but death now that Ciniro recognizes himself as the object of her desire. As Ulf Olsson contends, “In forcing the silent person to speak, language becomes violent.”¹⁸⁸ Coerced by Ciniro to admit her love for him, Mirra is subjected to a violence that is both physical and psychological: she is led to commit suicide as a result of being made to break her silence and openly acknowledge a passion that in the eyes of her father is nothing less than reprehensible.¹⁸⁹ While speech and the secret love it attempts to expose are a source of psychological torment for Antigone and Clitennestra, with Mirra, Alfieri presents speech not only as psychological agony but as reified, transformed into the weapon with which the heroine kills herself. Thus, although she stabs herself with Ciniro’s “brando,” it is her confession which has already killed her, as she explains:

Oh Ciniro!... Mi vedi...
 Presso al morire.... Io vendicarti.... seppi,...
 E punir me.... Tu stesso, a viva forza,
 L'orrido arcano.... dal cor.... mi strappasti....
 Ma, poichè sol colla mia vita.... Egli esce....

¹⁸⁸ Ulf Olsson, *Silence and Subject in Modern Literature. Spoken Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 5.

¹⁸⁹ Ciniro’s coercion of Mirra parallels, to some extent, Mikhail Bakhtin’s elaboration of the Socratic technique of *anacrisis*, which he describes as the “provocation of the word by the word,” in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ardis, 1973), 91. However, Ciniro is oblivious to the contents of Mirra’s confession and thus, unlike in Socrates, cannot comprehend the ways in which his choice of words leads the heroine to her ruinous pronouncement of the object of her passion.

Dal labro mio,... men rea.... mi moro....

(V, 2, vv. 192-197)

Mirra's suicide becomes an extension of the paradox out of which Alfieri constructs the relationship between silence and discourse throughout the tragedy. In dying and submitting to an eternal silence, the heroine locates death's expiatory capacity to render her "men rea." But upon Ciniro's reveal to the horrified Cecri of the incestuous object of their daughter's passion,¹⁹⁰ she reveals herself aware that any complete expiation is not guaranteed, as her final words to Euricléa indicate:

Quand.io.... tel.... chiesi,...
 Darmi.... allora,... Euricléa, dovevi il ferro....
 Io moriva.... Innocente;... empia.... ora... muojo

(V, 4, vv. 218-220)

Mirra dies completely abandoned by Ciniro and Cecri. In her last moments, she is made to feel the full weight of her passion's iniquity as a result of Ciniro's disclosure to his wife. While the king ushers his spouse away from the dying heroine so that they might both perish from disgrace and sorrow in private, both Ciniro and Cecri remain disconnected from their daughter, their tragedy concluding at the margins of her own, their deaths occurring within the private confines of the domestic sphere from which Mirra has been permanently expelled.¹⁹¹ As for Mirra,

¹⁹⁰ "Più figlia / Non c'è costei. D'infame orrendo amore / Ardeva ella per.... Ciniro...." (V, 3, vv. 212-214).

¹⁹¹ In *Silenced Voices: The Poetics of Speech in Ovid*, Bartolo Natoli analyzes the ways in which silence acts to alienate the silenced figure in Ovid. Natoli's reading of silence as a force by which figures are thrust toward the margins of society suggests interesting implications for *Mirra* and opens up new avenues of thought regarding Alfieri's use of silence in his tragic reworking of the Ovidian Myrrha. While Natoli insists that in Ovid speech confirms a person's full participation in society, in *Mirra* Alfieri effects the opposite. Not only does Mirra's silence alienate her from her loved ones, so does her speech, especially as the tragic action progresses. Thus, Alfieri creates out of both Mirra's silence and speech the paradox by which she finds herself completely and inalterably repulsed from the domestic sphere in which her parents reside. For a reading of the consequences of silence in Ovid that offers up intriguing points of convergence

she dies completely exposed, her immoral desires revealed despite her best efforts to suppress them. But it is not at the tragedy's conclusion that her passion is finally laid bare. Instead, Alfieri has denuded it over the course of the tragic action in his analogous stripping away of the distinctions between silence and discourse so that each comes to assist and foster the other, rendering silence telling and discourse paradoxically silent, and both condemnable and compromising. It is amid this morass of contradictions that Mirra's psychic torment intensifies and she finds herself completely isolated from the tragedy's other characters, who remain oblivious to the tragic paradoxes in which they play a major role. However, for Alfieri, Mirra's heroism lies in her recognition of these contradictions.¹⁹² Although she dies "empia" and in total desolation, she nonetheless retains a lucidity of mind capable of penetrating the tragic absurdities which precipitate her ruin. This ruin, though portrayed as inevitable, is not entirely the contrivance of divine fate, but is, instead, the result of Alfieri's demythologization of his classical subjects and his interest in the complexities and ambiguities of the human mind and the horror which it has the latent potential to generate, but also to resist.¹⁹³

with Alfieri as well as points of divergence from him, see Natoli, *Silenced Voices: The Poetics of Speech in Ovid* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

¹⁹² In his analysis of Racine's *Phèdre*, Richard Goodkin writes that "the revelation of Phèdre's innermost desires leads not to an act of individuation, but rather to Phèdre's complete assimilation to Venus and the consequent loss of her heroic identity." See Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 164. Alfieri, however, minimizes the role that Venere exercises in *Mirra* and transforms the goddess into a mere expedient for increasing the moral ambiguity of Mirra's situation. Mirra does not become less heroic when she reveals her passion for Ciniro. Instead, for Alfieri, her reveal coincides with her complete awareness of the tragedy's inextricable web of contradictions. Her death is not the revenge of Venere. In fact, she makes no mention of the goddess at her death, unlike Phèdre. Instead, her suicide is a heroic attempt to free herself from the contradictions that she alone recognizes.

¹⁹³ Cf. Camerino, "Il modello tradito. La volontà di fuga e di morte nel linguaggio della *Mirra*," 233. Camerino writes that Mirra's true state of innocence at her death, instead, "si configura come *non resistenza alle passioni*" (Camerino, 233, the emphasis is mine); and Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate*," 32. Fido argues that if destiny ultimately deprived tragic man of choice in ancient

Greek tragedy, Alfieri recreates this lack of choice in *Mirra*, where the heroine's speech reveals how "la fanciulla *non può non parlare, e, dunque, non morire*" (Fido, 32).

Chapter 2

Sacrificial Bodies: Maternity and Death

II.1. “Non sono io madre pari all’altre”: Giocasta and the Transgression of Maternity

The maternal body is a conspicuous presence in Alfierian tragedy. Prior to Alfieri, the most notable tragic mother within eighteenth-century Italian tragedy was the heroine of Scipione Maffei’s highly celebrated *Merope*, first staged on 12 June 1713. This was the work against which the success of all other eighteenth-century Italian tragedies was measured.¹ Following in the vein of Maffei’s *Merope*, who agrees to marry the tyrant, Polifonte, so that her son Egisto’s life might be spared, Alfierian mothers are often called upon to sacrifice themselves in defense of the tragic hero, their son. And similar to Maffei’s heroine, who attempts on two occasions to kill Egisto whom she mistakenly believes is her son’s murderer, they can often be read as transgressive figures. As Julia Kristeva would argue, the maternal body occasions death through its procreative capacity.² However, through *Giocasta*, *Clitennestra*, and *Merope*, three of his most enduring tragic mothers, Alfieri goes further than Maffei in proposing the maternal body as a site of various contradictions.³ Across multiple tragedies, the maternal body becomes simultaneously terrible and sublime, mournful and murderous, as the tragic mother comes to find herself in conflict with her

¹ For an analysis of Maffei’s *Merope* and its precedents, see Paola Trivero’s chapter “La madre,” in *Tragiche donne: Tipologie femminili nel teatro del Settecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2000), 7-49.

² Although Kristeva does not explicitly refer to the heroines of eighteenth-century Italian tragedy, her theorization of the maternal body is useful in teasing out the contradictions embedded within Alfieri’s representation of tragic mothers and their recurrent association with death. Kristeva insists that the matricidal drive, necessary for personal individuation and sexual differentiation, cannot be successfully inverted into a “death-bearing maternal image” in women. She also argues that “feminine immortality” is a myth; instead, women, who must be read, invariably, as mothers in Kristevan thought, find themselves linked to death as a consequence of their procreative capacity. From this linkage with death results a lethal, melancholic self-loathing. See Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 28-29. This tension between a mother’s procreative and death-bearing capacities will become a hallmark of the tragic maternal figure in Alfieri. It opens up the mother as a site of tragic conflict that will be resolved only with difficulty.

³ Maffei was not the first Italian tragedian to treat the story of *Merope*; however, his version was the best known prior to Alfieri’s take on the subject.

hero-son. Her body acts as an obstacle to her son's goals, and its presence within the tragic action creates a dilemma which the tragedy never formally manages to resolve by its end. Alfieri's firm association of the maternal body with death highlights the tragic mother's ambivalence within the tragic action, since the death to which she is linked is presented as her own through a propitiatory act of self-sacrifice, and yet also seen in the dead bodies which appear when her act of self-sacrifice fails. This ambivalence towards the maternal figure reappears in Alfieri's own commentary on his tragedies in which he both praises and condemns his tragic mothers. The subsequent analysis looks at the function the maternal body assumes in Alfierian tragedy and at how tragic mothers, important figures in eighteenth-century Italian tragedy, attempt to assert an autonomy in defiance of the tragic logic that demands that they play a subordinate role with respect to their hero-sons. As will be argued, the tragic mother ultimately fails to realize an autonomy capable of resolving the conflict existing between her and her heroic offspring. For Alfieri, the maternal body is typically a site of horror and the subject of an incomplete sacrifice. Furthermore, it is acted upon by the intermingling forces of heroism and villainy which grant the tragic mother an uneasy and contradictory presence within the tragic action.

With *Giocasta*, Alfieri introduces the figure of the mother into his tragic pantheon.⁴ Commenting on *Polinice*, his second acknowledged tragedy, he writes that he was inspired primarily by Cornelio Bentivoglio's translation of Statius' *Thebaid*.⁵ However, other sources for the tragedy, which was initially conceived in French in 1775, then versified in Italian in 1776 and

⁴ In *Filippo*, his first acknowledged tragedy, Alfieri presents the figure of the stepmother through the character Isabella; however, this heroine has nothing maternal about her, being close in age to and secretly in love with her stepson Carlo, who is also her former betrothed.

⁵ Alfieri writes: "Io sceglieva questo soggetto, più assai per bollire di gioventù, e infiammato dalla lettura di Stazio, che per matura riflessione," *Parere sulle tragedie e altre prose critiche*, ed. Morena Pagliai (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1978), 87.

1781, include Racine's *La Thébaidé* and Pierre Brumoy's *Théâtre des Grecs*, an early eighteenth-century collection of French translations of select classical dramas, which also included Brumoy's commentary, and through which Alfieri familiarized himself with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.⁶

Although she represents his first tragic depiction of maternity and features prominently in the drama, Alfieri is markedly circumspect in his appraisal of Giocasta. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, he writes: "Di Giocasta non mi occorre dir nulla, perché a me pare ch'ella sia vera madre."⁷ He goes on to address briefly the relationship between the horror of Giocasta's condition and the resulting tragic effect produced in spectators: "Ma tutto l'orrore dello stato suo non produrrà però in noi la metà dell'effetto, che avrebbe potuto produrre nei popoli di un'altra opinione religiosa."⁸ In the midst of attaining tragic maturity with *Polinice*, Alfieri alludes to certain defects in this otherwise restrained and pithy evaluation of Giocasta. According to him, the horror of the tragic mother's condition loses comprehensibility in an age dominated by Christian providence as opposed to a polytheistic understanding of fate.⁹ Despite this, he points to, albeit in passing, the tragic antinomy that will define Giocasta's maternal presence in the tragedy. This antinomy is established by her conflicting identities as a "vera madre" and a mother marked by horror, capable of birthing monstrosities. In fact, Giocasta's final words in the tragedy make

⁶ Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi, *Alfieri* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2018), 63. Alfieri was also likely influenced by Seneca's *Phoenissae*. For an analysis of the relationship between *Polinice* and its Senecan source material, see Perdichizzi, "Le tragedie senecane e i modelli francesi," in *Testi e avantesti alfieriani* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2018), particularly pages 58-65.

⁷ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 88.

⁸ Alfieri, 88.

⁹ Earlier in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes: "Ma, convien dire il vero, che questo soggetto è pure assai meno tragico teatrale per noi, di quello che lo dovea essere pe' Greci, e per gli stessi Romani, i quali avendo pure le medesime opinioni religiose, potevano assai più di noi esser mossi da quella forza del fato, e dell'ira divina, che pajono essere i segreti motori di tutta questa tragedia" (Alfieri, 87).

reference to this maternity rendered heinous by an adverse fate and thus fit only to produce sons whose fratricidal hatred leaves them monsters:

Ultrice Aletto,
Io son lor madre; in me il vipereo torci
Flagel sanguigno: è questo il fianco, è questo,
Che incestuoso a tai mostri diè vita.

(V, 2, vv. 223-226)

Although these words conclude Giocasta's presence in the tragedy, Alfieri moves to associate her with a contaminated and horror-inducing maternity at the very onset of the work. In the opening scene of Act I, Giocasta seeks solace in her daughter. As a result of Antigone's rectitude, she can almost see her motherhood restored to its natural dignity:

D'Edippo io moglie, e in un di Edippo madre,
Inorridir di madre al nome io soglio:
Eppur da te caro mi è quasi il nome
Udir di madre....

(I, 1, vv. 5-8)

Interested in tragic antithesis, Alfieri posits two contradictions representative of the duality of Giocasta's character, which will be explored in greater depth as the tragedy unfolds. The heroine laments her status as both "moglie" and "madre" to Edipo, which causes her to recoil in horror ("inorridir") at the name of mother. Yet it is because of Antigone that the appellation of mother is almost "caro," thus laying the groundwork for the second contradiction on which Giocasta's dual nature as mother to her son's children is founded: her maternity is both a source of unnatural horror and yet not entirely incapable of evoking sentiments consistent with Alfieri's own designation of her as a "vera madre," who is given to total devotion to her children.¹⁰ By having Giocasta refer

¹⁰ Stephanie Laggini Fiore, *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 141-142. Fiore writes that Giocasta differentiates herself from Antigone through her lack of "reasonable partiality," which the latter

to herself three times as “madre,” with each use causing the term to assume new and conflicting connotations, Alfieri insists on Giocasta’s maternal identity within the ensuing tragic action and also establishes this motherhood as beset by the irresolvable contradictions that will make her not merely a passive and pathetic witness to the fraternal conflict between Polinice and Eteocle, but an agent in it.

To that end, Alfieri has his heroine, still in the same opening lines of the tragedy, raise her “colpevol voce” (I, 1, v. 10) and beseech the gods to permit her warring sons to direct at her “la giusta loro ira tremenda” (I, 1, v. 12) in atonement for her crimes. Antigone gently reproaches her mother for her futile attempt to sway the course of fate whose adversities were already foretold prior to her birth:

In ciel, per noi, pietà non resta, o madre;
 Noi tutti abborre il cielo. Edippo, è nome
 Tal, che a disfar suoi figli per sè basta;
 Noi, figli rei già dal materno fianco;
 Noi dannati gran tempo anzi che nati...
 Che piangi or, madre? il dì, che noi nascemmo,
 Era del pianto il dì.

(I, 1, vv. 13-19)

Antigone remarks on Giocasta’s culpable maternity that has left her offspring “rei dal materno fianco.” It is a comment that further entrenches Giocasta’s contaminated motherhood within the tragedy and prepares for its highly visible presence within the tragic events to come. In other words, her incestuous coupling with Edipo, by which her children were “dannati” at birth, does not merely act as the springboard for Alfieri’s subsequent elaboration of the tragic conflict between Polinice and Eteocle, itself depicted at its fatal denouement. Instead, with his early and fervent insistence on Giocasta’s blighted maternity as a source of her sons’ mutual antagonism, Alfieri

woman displays throughout the tragedy when assessing the behavior of Polinice and Eteocle (Fiore, 141-142).

ensures that the proceeding tragic action fully implicates Giocasta herself and transforms her into an inextricable part of its progression. Nonetheless, Antigone's later rebuke of her mother for weeping reveals another contradiction underlying Giocasta's antinomic character: she is both a mother given to a dolorous "pianto" and other pathetic outbursts of sentiment, and a mother looking to challenge fate by offering herself up as a sacrifice. This struggle between passivity and action becomes yet another defining contradiction of Giocasta's tragic motherhood.

As mother to her son's children, a "vera madre" whose maternity generates monstrosities, and a mother alternating between weeping and a desire to halt through the sacrifice of her physical body the succession of crimes from her own house, Giocasta is a figure marked by multiple contradictions. Critical attention, however, has largely focused on her displays of desperate maternal weeping and her supplications to Polinice and Eteocle amid their conflict. For example, Raffaello Ramat locates Giocasta's greatest poetry in her maternal "pianto sconcolato."¹¹ Folco Portinari similarly describes Giocasta as a woman characterized by a "pietà dilatata, enfatizzata, innanzitutto di madre infelice e percossa."¹² Lastly, Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi confirm previous readings of the figure, summarizing Giocasta as a "disperata *mater dolorosa* tutta compresa dell'orrore della situazione."¹³

¹¹ Raffaello Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1958), 26. Ramat writes that it is her weeping which becomes "la realtà poetica del linguaggio di Giocasta" in the tragedy (Ramat, 26). Cf. Mario Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni Editore, 1953), 113. Fubini writes, instead, that Giocasta is poetically enlivened precisely when she puts aside "l'atteggiamento generico di madre tenera e straziata" in order to confront the immensity and horror of her fate (Fubini, 113).

¹² Folco Portinari, *Di Vittorio Alfieri e della tragedia* (Turin: G. Giappichelli Editore, 1976), 97.

¹³ Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 65.

It is true that Alfieri advances the vision of Giocasta as a weeping mother throughout the tragic action. Taking care to distinguish between sororal and maternal affections,¹⁴ he ensures that Giocasta exhibits impartiality toward her two warring sons through her tragic, all-embracing maternity, while Antigone, for her part, prefers her brother Polinice and supports his claims to the throne. Paola Trivero contends that Giocasta's impartiality results from the "potere taumaturgico delle lacrime" to which the tragic mother entrusts herself.¹⁵ Therefore, despite Eteocle denying Polinice the throne of Thebes, which should annually devolve to him as a result of their fraternal pact, Giocasta does not forsake Eteocle and refuses to admit that his actions are guided by tyrannical intent, which fact Antigone has already clearly observed. Thus while in Act I, scene 1, Antigone anticipates the "spettacol crudo" (I, 1, v. 41) that awaits her brothers, Giocasta responds with a maternal lamentation operating in tension with maternal hope:

Viva mi tiene ancora
 Il desir caldo che nel core io porto,
 E l'alta speme, di ammorzar col pianto
 Quella, che tra' miei figli arde, funesta
 Discorde fiamma...

(I, 1, vv. 49-53)

Giocasta's "alta speme" coexists uneasily with her "pianto." Although her tears flow as a result of an ancient crime whose consequences are still bitterly felt, she nonetheless believes them capable of performing miracles. It is the resulting delusion produced in a mother torn between optimism

¹⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 88. In *Polinice*, Alfieri is careful to diversify the sentiments of his characters. In fact, Roberto Salsano notes that unlike Racine in the *Thébaïde*, Alfieri takes pains to differentiate between the natures of Eteocle and Polinice in his retelling of the Theban myth. The two warring brothers are thus, like their mother and sister, distinguished by contrasting attitudes and feelings that confirm Alfieri's interest in tragic antithesis. See Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1979), 69-130.

¹⁵ Paola Trivero, "Polinice," in *Percorsi alfieriani* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2014), 37.

and grief that Antigone swiftly moves to criticize: “E ten lusinghi?... Oh madre! / Uno è lo scettro, i regnator son duo: / Che speri tu?” (I, 1, vv. 53-55).

When Antigone later argues that violence is the necessary outcome of Eteocle’s abuse of power and Polinice’s wrath fomented in exile as a result of his brother’s betrayal,¹⁶ Giocasta’s response becomes a composite of the various contradictions defining her character:

Ed io, non sono? aver tra loro può loco
L’ira, se in mezzo io sto? Deh! non mi torre
La speme mia! – Per quanto or fama suoni,
Che a sostener dell’esul Polinice
Gl’infranti dritti, d’Argo il re si appresti;
Per quanto altero ed ostinato seggia
Sul trono l’altro; in me, nel petto mio,
Nel pianto mio, nel mio sdegno rimane
Forza, che basti a raffrenarli. Udrammi
Il re superbo rammentar sua fede
Giurata invano; e Polinice udrammi
Rammentar, ch’ei pur nacque in questa Tebe,
Ch’or col ferro egli assal.... Che più? mi udranno,
Se mi vi sforzan pur, lo infame loro
Nascimento attestar: nè l’empie spade
Troveran via fra lor, se non pria tinte
Entro al sangue materno.

(I, 1, vv. 64-80)

Giocasta’s words point to the extreme interiorization of the tragic events within her maternal body, a body which exists both at the margins and at the center of the drama. It is relegated to the margins because it is animated by the delusional hope that it might be able to put an end to the conflict between her sons. But it also finds itself located at the drama’s center because of its status as the nucleus of the animosity spurring the brothers to fratricide.¹⁷ As Roberto Salsano argues, in

¹⁶ “E a forza darlo / Come vorrà chi può tenerlo a forza?” (I, 1, vv. 62-63), Antigone says in reference to the throne capable of being obtained, held, and only relinquished through forceful means. Her mother lacks the same political astuteness.

¹⁷ Roberto Salsano observes that in *Polinice* Alfieri establishes a “contesto psicologico-affettivo di scontro fra affetto materno e familiare e analisi realistica e politica.” Against this backdrop of placatory maternal

comparison with the more rational Jocaste found in Racine, the Alfierian Giocasta lives “più passionalmente un dramma interiore collegato alla inquieta coscienza della colpa fatale.”¹⁸ But this same “dramma interiore” implicates not only Giocasta’s maternal conscience, concentrated entirely on quelling the violence threatened by her sons, but, so too, her maternal body through which she hopes to extinguish the threat of that same violence. Indeed, she desires that both Polinice and Eteocle tinge their “empie spade” with her “sangue materno,” and thus sate their thirst for bloodshed by spilling her own blood first.

Although motivated by the vain hope that her body might be used to prevent an otherwise inevitable tragedy, Giocasta remains an abject figure, in the Kristevan sense, throughout the tragedy because of her body.¹⁹ Indeed, with the emphasis he places on Giocasta’s material presence, on her maternal flesh rendered iniquitous and profane by her incestuous union with Edipo, Alfieri imparts a certain tragic solidity to Giocasta’s body that the other characters within the tragedy do not possess. Not even Polinice and Eteocle, through whose protracted deaths their fratricidal hatred attains its most material consequences, offer bodies granted the same weightiness within the tragic action. In her response to Antigone, Giocasta refers to the “infame” birth of her sons, one in a recurring series of references to her perverted maternity and body consequently left

sentiment, which is set in opposition to an ineluctable political reality motivated by an ineradicable hate, Giocasta emerges as a figure who is granted a central place within the tragic action and yet left unable to redirect it (Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 89).

¹⁸ Salsano, 117.

¹⁹ For Kristeva, the figure of the mother is “abject;” she is a demoniacal, destructive force who threatens societal (and therefore symbolic) order through her physical defilement. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), particularly pages 56-89.

culpable within the tragedy. Elsewhere, she will draw attention to her material, maternal body in a union of gesture and language that Alfieri will later bring to fulfillment in *Mirra*.²⁰

In Act II, scene 3, the heroine inserts herself physically between her sons after Polinice has removed himself from the camps surrounding Thebes and entered the besieged city to meet his brother. She exhibits her body in indignant response to the hero, who justifies his arrival in Thebes, along with his father-in-law Adrasto's Argive forces, on the basis of the treacherous murder of Tideo, emissary sent to request the throne on Polinice's own behalf. The tragic mother's body becomes the focus of Giocasta's response:

Deh! ciò non dir: non v'hai tu madre in questa
 Reggia? e, finchè ve l'hai, ti estimi inerme?
 Ecco il tuo scudo, miralo, il mio petto;
 Questo mio fianco, che ad un tempo entrambi
 Voi già portò: deh! l'altro scaglia; ai nostri
 Caldi amplessi ei s'oppon; tacito dirne
 Par, che nemico infra nemici stai.

(II, 3, vv. 93-99)

If Alfieri finds *Polinice* on the tension emerging from the interplay of male/filial and female/maternal bodies within the tragic dimensions of the drama, he attempts a resolution through Giocasta's renunciation of her body which takes the form of a sacrifice. The tragic mother offers her body up as a "scudo" in order to defend Polinice against the alleged, violent scheming of his brother.²¹ Nonetheless, Giocasta's performative supplication to Polinice, in which her body stands

²⁰ The emphasis Alfieri places on *Mirra*'s gestural language serves both to enhance and undermine the heroine's silence, a silence which signifies her extreme isolation within the tragic action and whose rupturing only increases the degree to which this silence has already alienated her from her loved ones. Similarly, through Giocasta's repeated gestures to her corrupted maternal body, Alfieri reinforces the tragic mother's impurity, which she openly acknowledges. Giocasta's desperate solitude is thus heightened, as gesture becomes posited as a key communicator of female alienation within Alfierian tragedy.

²¹ Alfieri will subsequently return to and deepen this image of the maternal body transformed into a shield in *Oreste* and *Merope*, two tragedies in which motherhood also animates the tragic action as one of its principal concerns.

in for the weapons with which her son has arrived in Thebes, is suffused with the contradictions that continue to complicate Alfieri's image of the heroine as a "vera madre." Once again, Giocasta calls attention to her iniquitous maternity by exhibiting her infamous "fianco." Yet she posits its paradoxical ability to give way to untainted maternal affection through her reference to the "caldi amplessi" with which she receives Polinice. However, her allusion to Eteocle's recoil at the sight of their embrace reveals the lack of separation between her purest motherly instincts and the perverted maternity that has engendered the hostility between her two sons.

Julia Kristeva argues that within the Sophoclean dimensions of the Oedipal myth, Jocasta is both *miasma* and *agos*, or a pollutive substance that results in the defilement of that which comes into contact with her.²² While Oedipus in his ability to recognize and know his own abjection, and therefore confront the horrifying Other it reveals, can thus purify it, Jocasta cannot likewise become a cleansing *pharmakos*.²³ Nevertheless, the Alfierian Giocasta attempts to reverse the patterns of defilement propagated by her maternal body.²⁴ By thrusting herself in between her sons as a "scudo," she looks to take the impact of their fratricidal rancor and through her death prevent their own. In order for it to be tragically effective, such a proposition requires Alfieri to foreground Giocasta's material body throughout the tragedy and put due emphasis on its contaminated

²² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 85.

²³ Kristeva, 85. Julia Kristeva suggests that Jocasta's inability to become a cleansing *pharmakos* derives from the "the mystery, the enigma of femininity," whose defilement only men such as Oedipus are able to penetrate and subordinate to their powers of reason, thus purifying it after coming into contact with it (Kristeva, 85). Rendered ambiguous by being both a "speaking being," thus a participant in the symbolic order governed by men, and a "reproductive being," from whom men separate themselves at birth in a confirmation of their sexual difference, Jocasta cannot cleanse herself of the defilement to which her maternal body has been inextricably linked and on which, as a result, patriarchal society has been founded.

²⁴ Kristeva argues that it is through procreation and its attendant signs (e.g. menstruation) that women are upheld as defiled (Kristeva, 71).

maternal properties. To help him justify the focus he places on her body and its sacrifice (indeed, Giocasta presents her body as a sacrificial offering multiple times throughout the tragedy), Alfieri invests the tragic mother with a psychological depth of character that belies his elliptical mention of her in the *Parere sulle tragedie*. In fact, although he writes that the conflict between Polinice and Eteocle is a subject worthy of tragedy due to the “terribilissima catastrofe” resulting from the “ambizione di regno mista ad un odio fatale dagli Dei ispirato nel cuore di due fratelli in punizione dell’incesto del loro *padre*” (the emphasis is mine),²⁵ Giocasta’s maternal culpability and her own acknowledgment of it animate the confrontation between the two brothers in such a way that the tragedy’s ensuing violence appears to derive *more* from the guilt of the mother than from the father. As a result, Edipo’s presence is minimal in the tragedy beyond his expository role in prompting the animosity between Polinice and Eteocle through his transgression of natural human bonds. In addition, it is largely Giocasta who refers to the exiled king by name within the tragedy. Whereas in *Antigone* the eponymous heroine makes repeated mention of her father and his crimes, in *Polinice* it is Giocasta who is assigned, and who willingly assumes, the principal share of guilt for her incestuous union with Edipo through her constant references to her relationship with him. This guilt is reinforced by the horror that she feels as a result of her contaminated maternity.

During their first encounter within the tragic action, Giocasta evokes her “fallo” in order to dissuade Polinice and Eteocle from violence. Picking up Polinice’s reference to the “empj” sheltered within Thebes,²⁶ she employs the term in acknowledgment of her own guilt:

Empj, voi soli; ed io, che a voi son madre.
Or via si ammendi il fallo mio: quel ferro
Volgete in me; sono vostro sangue anch’io

²⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 87.

²⁶ “In Tebe / Me rivedrai; ma in altro aspetto: agli empj / Apportator d’inevitabil morte” (II, 3, vv. 142-144).

Emuli al male oprar, d'Edippo figli,
 Nati al delitto, ed al delitto spinti
 Dalle furie implacabili, qui, qui
 Torcete i brandi; eccolo il ventre infame,
 Stanza d'infame nascimento. Ucciso
 Non il fratel, da voi la madre uccisa;
 Ben altro è il fallo; è ben di voi più degno.

(II, 3, vv. 145-154)

Although Giocasta calls upon the memory of Edipo in her passionate rebuke, her transgressive maternity is once more given special focus. According to the heroine, this maternity has portended the violence between the warring brothers, and the gravity of its crimes outweighs the gravity of her sons' potential murder of their mother. Notwithstanding the fact that Alfieri titles the tragedy after Polinice, the drama's hero and through whom he is able to espouse anti-tyrannical rhetoric,²⁷ Giocasta is not a figure ancillary to the fraternal conflict. By repeatedly evoking her perverted maternity, Alfieri posits the horror of that contaminated motherhood as the basis for the drama's tragic proceedings; it is this horror—which Giocasta conjures up in her fervent reproaches of her sons and in her recalls to her tragic maternal state—with which the entire tragedy is suffused. Giocasta is thus an integral actor within the tragedy and under whose horrifying aegis the tragic action develops and reaches its fatal conclusion.

If Alfieri has the heroine regret ever being mother and wife to Edipo, and therefore mother to Polinice and Eteocle,²⁸ it is Polinice who evokes his mother during his private encounter with Creonte. Promising to reveal to Polinice the secret of his brother's planned treachery, i.e. a poisoned cup with which Eteocle will underhandedly seal his transfer of power, Creonte urges his

²⁷ For a reading of the politics of *Polinice*, see Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, particularly pages 13-24 in which the work is described as a "tragedia del potere" (Salsano, 13).

²⁸ Giocasta laments bitterly: "Mai non t'avess'io avuto, onor funesto! / Ch'io non sarei madre or d'Edippo, e moglie; / Ch'io non sarei di voi, perfidi, madre" (II, 4, vv. 233-235).

nephew to swear an oath to remain faithful to him.²⁹ It is on his mother's life that Polinice swears: "Sì, per la vita della madre io 'l giuro; / Mi è sacra, il sai: parla" (II, 6, vv. 343-344). The hero's words evince Giocasta's contradictory presence within the tragic action as a figure both "sacra" and yet capable of generating horror, as a figure both earmarked for sacrifice and yet whose very sacrifice ends in failure due to the obstinance of her sons who refuse to put an end to their hostility.

In the final act of the tragedy, following the duel between her sons outside the walls of Thebes, Giocasta's insistence on her guilt culminates in an outpouring of grief and the full recognition of the horror produced as a result of her impure maternal condition:

Io forse,
Non son io quella, che al figliuol mio diedi
Figli, e fratelli?... Ed essi, quegli infami,
Ch'or bevon l'un dell'altro in campo il sangue
Frutto non son d'orrido incesto? Ah! tutti
Siam cosa vostra; tutti.

(V, 1, vv. 14-19)

Although *Polinice* has been described as a "tragedia del potere,"³⁰ in which the fraternal struggle for control of the throne of Thebes permits Alfieri to express his ideological hatred of tyranny, Giocasta's abhorrence for her maternal state reveals that political struggle to be founded on a substratum of desperate human sentiment resulting from the cruel imposition of fate, whose horror Giocasta not only remembers but relives throughout the tragedy. Through her recurring evocation of her guilt—here expressed as the "orrido incesto" through which the horror of fate is conjoined with the horror of her own maternity—she comes to exercise, as Mario Trovato insists, more than

²⁹ "...Tu, spergiurar non sai... — / Osi tu sacra a me giurar tua fede / D'orrido arcano, ch'io mi appresto a dirti?" (II, 6, vv. 340-342).

³⁰ Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 13.

a “funzione puramente espansiva” within the tragedy.³¹ Indeed, Giocasta reveals how for Alfieri, the political conflict of *Polinice* not only engages the more intimate dimensions of human psychology, but is entirely animated by tragic affect.³² If the tragic conflict between Polinice and Eteocle is founded on an irrepressible and ancient hatred (early on in the tragedy Eteocle declares to Creonte: “In me quest’odio è antico / Quanto mia vita” [I, 4, vv. 243-244]),³³ this same hatred implicates Giocasta’s similar hatred for her own maternity, whose aberrant nature she recognizes in despair. “Io tutti in me gli affetti / Sento di madre, e d’esser madre abborro” (V, 1, vv. 20-21), she says. Alfieri’s use of the verb “abborrire” is a phonetic recall to the inescapable horror (“orrore”) of her maternal state.

This horror, of which Giocasta is both victim and agent, is also closely linked, paradoxically, to her propensity for tears. In the first scene of Act II, Creonte reveals how both Giocasta’s maternal horror and maternal weeping are intertwined:

Deh! fine omai poni *al lungo tuo pianto*.
 Questo dì stesso, che pareva di stragi
 Apportatore, non fia spento forse,
 Che vedrem pace in Tebe. Un *orror tale*
Seppi inspirar di contant’empia guerra
 D’Eteócle nel cor, che in mente quasi
 Di ristorar la violata fede
 Fermo egli ha

(II, 1, vv. 1-8, the emphasis is mine)

³¹ Mario Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri: La natura del limite tragico* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1978), 49. For a counterpoint, cf. Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 28. Raffaello Ramat argues that Giocasta bookends the tragedy, appearing as its instigator through her culpable maternity.

³² See Arnaldo Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite: Un’interpretazione di Vittorio Alfieri* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1994), 37-66.

³³ Laura Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti. “Affetti naturali” e “affetti di libertà” nelle tragedie alfieriane*. (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2017), 140.

Despite the false pretenses under which he assures Giocasta of the success of her efforts to prevent bloodshed between her sons, Alfieri has Creonte individuate a connection between his sister's maternal weeping ("lungo tuo pianto") and her ability to inspire horror ("un orror tale / Seppi ispirar"). Giocasta's weeping substantiates her devotion to her unhappy progeny in keeping with her designation as a "vera madre." Creonte also links her tears to the horror of violence inspired in the otherwise bellicose Eteocle, even if the ensuing tragic action will quickly prove this to be false. Nonetheless, Alfieri moves to associate Giocasta's weeping with a less violent outcome to the hostilities between Polinice and Eteocle. Yet he creates out of these displays of maternal grief and supplication a paradox in which tears intended to sue for peace become inseparable from the horror resulting from Giocasta's perverted maternity

In response to Creonte, the heroine says:

Io piangerò; che posso
 Poco altro omai: preghi, minacce, e preghi,
 Mescendo andrò; ma il sai, non sono io madre
 Pari all'altre; nè vuol ragion, ch'io spero
 Quel, ch'io non merto, filial rispetto.

(II, 1, vv. 17-21)

Although Giocasta has often been considered a secondary character within the tragedy, passively weeping on the sidelines of the greater, and more immediate, tragic conflict between Polinice and Eteocle,³⁴ her apparent passivity is undermined by her coherent reflections on her atypical maternity ("ma il sai, non sono io madre / Pari all'altre"). Despite her circumscribing epithet "vera madre," Giocasta openly acknowledges the status that estranges her from other mothers and denies her the respect owed to her as a mother herself. Her recognition of this maternal alienation reveals

³⁴ For two such readings, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 102-116; and Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 31-52.

the patterns of violence to which she is inescapably bound and in which she participates. As she indicates to Creonte, she intermingles “preghi” and “minacce” when addressing her sons, thus demonstrating how her singular maternity and its threat of violence are indivisible within the tragic dimensions of *Polinice*.

Far from existing on the sidelines of the conflict engendered by the fratricidal hatred of her sons, Giocasta’s weeping, in its connection to her horror-inducing maternity, immerses the tragic mother fully within the tragic action.³⁵ Giocasta is a mother subject to mourning from the very onset of the tragedy, in which her premonitory remarks to Antigone are laden with the knowledge of the tragedy’s conclusion through the recall to her guilt. Although Giocasta has been characterized as a figure given to hopeful delusion and an inability to appreciate the ineradicable nature of the hatred motivating her sons,³⁶ through her anticipatory mourning she presages the tragedy’s fratricide; any delusion on her part, furthermore, comes to be fractured by unequivocal understanding even before the tragedy’s end. At one point, Polinice asks his mother: “O madre, / Sì mal conosci i figli tuoi?” (II, 4, vv. 206-207). Later, she declares to her son: “A eterno pianto / Dal ciel, da voi, dannata io son; nè fia, / Che cessi mai” (III, 3, vv. 105-107). Although she produces tears intended to sway her sons from violence, Alfieri does not disassociate Giocasta’s weeping from her maternal guilt and its resulting horror, both of which he has his heroine readily acknowledge throughout the tragedy. As such, in her grief, she not only provides an affective counterpoint to the Alfierian aversion to tyranny, which undergirds the conflict between Polinice

³⁵ Paola Trivero writes that within the tragic action Giocasta “è personaggio costante” (Trivero, “Polinice,” in *Percorsi alfieriani*, 40). Trivero specifies: “Giocasta personaggio costante e coinvolto in prima persona in due fondamentali scene: quella del giuramento infranto e quella del duplice fratricidio in parte visualizzato sulla scena” (Trivero, 41).

³⁶ Roberto Salsano refers to Giocasta’s speech which throughout the tragedy alternates between being a “‘grido’ di dolore o di illusa speranza” (Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 31).

and Eteocle;³⁷ she is, more importantly, the character through whom the tragedy's horror finds its fullest expression and assumes its most tragic significance, because she herself is an unwitting agent of that horror.

Nicole Loraux has argued for mourning as an active and not passive emotion within the context of ancient Greece, including in its corresponding drama.³⁸ Loraux's association of mourning with memory capable of engendering wrath and violence can be used to understand Giocasta's own mourning within *Polinice*.³⁹ Although the placatory quality of her motherhood has been proposed,⁴⁰ in light of the heroine's recurrent insistence on self-sacrifice, this maternity can also be viewed as not only monstrous, but destructive.

In Act III, scene 3, Polinice, under the influence of Creonte, reacts in suspicion at his mother and sister, momentarily believing that they have formulated a plot to betray him. Having

³⁷ For an analysis of the ways in which Alfieri complexifies the characters of Eteocle and Polinice, situating them in a position of tragic antithesis throughout the tragic action, see Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 13-24.

³⁸ In his seminal examination of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, Walter Benjamin also comments on the relationship between mourning and tragedy: "Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant* to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man. For feelings, however vague they may seem when perceived by the self, respond like a motorial reaction to a concretely structured world," *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 139.

³⁹ Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. Corinne Pache (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 44. For Loraux, maternal mourning is capable of engendering violence. She writes that it is a "notion of a sorrow that does not forget and feeds on itself" so that it becomes "dangerous for those around the mother whose mourning has congealed into a confrontation with herself and others." She goes on to name this type of ireful mourning: "This sorrow transformed into defiance has the dreaded name of that memory-wrath the Greeks have called *mênis* ever since the *Iliad* and Achilles' wrath" (Loraux, 44).

⁴⁰ Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 31-32. Fiore argues that Giocasta and the other tragic mothers within Alfierian tragedy "all act as arbiters, peacemakers, foils" and thus seek "to avert the tragedies that they sense will destroy their families" (Fiore, 31-32).

invoked the names of “madre” and “sorella,” he exclaims: “Son sacri / Tai nomi, è ver; ma son pur troppo in Tebe / Tremendi nomi” (III, 3, vv. 171-173). His exclamation reveals the irony inherent in the tragedy’s familial dimensions. This irony links familial roles, not least of which that of mother, to the violence generated within Thebes since the first transgression of the Oedipal house. To that end, Alfieri has Polinice identify his genitor, Edipo, and, indirectly, Giocasta, with the Erinyes.⁴¹ When Giocasta, who will adjure the same deities to assist in her suicide at the conclusion of the tragedy, reproaches Polinice for calling upon the Furies, he asks ironically: “Altri si denno / Nomi in Tebe invocar?” (III, 3, vv. 194-195).

As a mother who is both mournful and monstrous, supplicative and wrathful, Giocasta with her contradictions can find resolution only in death. While she exercises an anamnestic function within the tragic action, keeping alive the memory of her crimes and reliving the resulting guilt in her attempt to prevent further bloodshed within her house,⁴² she nonetheless seeks to halt the progression of crime through the destruction of her own body.⁴³ As Julia Kristeva writes with regard to the figure of the melancholic woman, she is “the dead one that has always been

⁴¹ “Oh! forse / Me dall’Averno respingete, o Erinni, / Perch’io finora men empio son di Edippo?” (III, 3, vv. 189-191).

⁴² If Giocasta remembers her guilt throughout the tragedy, she also employs memory to evoke the untainted vision of family which existed prior to her knowledge of Edipo’s true identity. Within this vision, as brothers, her sons are united by sacred, inviolable bonds:

Giudice fammi
Tra voi natura. Io, più d’ogni altri, in core
Io far ti posso risuonare addentro
Quel sacro nome di fratel, che omai
Più non rammenti.

(II, 2, vv. 28-32)

⁴³ Nicole Loraux writes that in Greek tradition mothers were considered “keepers of memory” (Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, 16).

abandoned within herself and can never kill outside herself.”⁴⁴ A woman whose moments of maternal optimism are decisively undone by her greater despair from which results an anticipatory mourning, Giocasta is a mother dead, or prepared to die, from the very beginning of the tragedy.⁴⁵ With her iniquitous maternity repeatedly evoked throughout the tragic action, her body assumes increased visibility in her efforts to sacrifice herself on behalf of her sons.

In lines already cited, Giocasta offers up her body as a “scudo” in defense of Polinice: “Ecco il tuo scudo, miralo, il mio petto” (II, 3, v. 95).⁴⁶ Her physical body thus becomes the means by which she and her offspring can atone for the crimes of their house. With Alfieri foregrounding Giocasta’s body in the conflict between Polinice and Eteocle, this maternal body is acted upon by dialectical forces within the tragic action, since it is simultaneously presented as both the antecedent of the violence between the two brothers and its possible solution, but only through its destruction.

In Act II, scene 3, after having offered her maternal breast in defense of Polinice and as a means by which the brothers can quench their thirst for bloodshed, Giocasta gives way to furious exasperation as her sons ignore the sacrificial gesture:

⁴⁴ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 30. Kristeva adds that this “melancholic woman” can only strike “moral and physical blows against herself” in her inability to kill anyone other than herself (Kristeva, 30). While she insists on the disintegration of verbal communication into a suffocating silence as a key feature of feminine melancholy, Kristeva’s argument for a self-punishing category of melancholy largely rings true for the Alfierian tragic mother. Giocasta, Clitennestra, and even Merope often threaten external violence, i.e. the death of the son or villain, but when violence is exercised, it is only directed successfully at the maternal body, either in the form of suicide, as in the case of Giocasta, or in the form of vituperative self-condemnation, as in the case of both Giocasta and Clitennestra.

⁴⁵ Loosely quoting Herbert Cysarz, Walter Benjamin writes: “The dying heroes of tragedy—thus, approximately wrote a young tragedian—have already long been dead before they actually die” (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 115).

⁴⁶ Nicole Loraux writes that “never is a woman’s breast more fascinating than when it belongs to a mother,” in *The Experience of Tiresias: The Feminine and Greek Man*, trans. Paula Wissing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 135. Indeed, for Alfieri, the female body is never more on display and addressed within the tragic action than when it is maternal.

E ingiusto è forse
 Il mio furor? — Non del richiesto regno,
 T'irriti tu; ma perchè in armi è chiesto?
 E tu, non stringi ad altro fin quell'armi,
 Che ad ottenere il regno tuo per l'anno? —
 L'un dunque il brando, il non suo scettro l'altro
 Deponga qui: mallevalor fra voi,
 Se giuro io ciò che già voi pria giuraste,
 Chi smentirmi ardirà?

(II, 3, vv. 156-164)

Her earlier supplications devolve into the “furor” of the mother desperate to prevent the otherwise inevitable deaths of her children. Having earlier associated her body with a shield (“scudo”), she now refers to her body as “mallevalor,” i.e. the physical guarantor of the peaceful exchange of power between Polinice and Eteocle. However, by inserting her body into the fray, and by tendering it to her sons as a sacrifice, Giocasta reveals the inescapable sequence of violence to which she and her progeny are bound. As scholars such as Arnaldo Di Benedetto and, more recently, Paola Trivero and Laura Nay have suggested, the ideological and domestic domains of Alfierian tragedy overlap, with the latter encroaching irremovably on the former.⁴⁷ Therefore, Giocasta’s maternal presence and her physical body do not exist at the margins of the hostility between Polinice and Eteocle but, rather, are drawn into its very center, being its iniquitous precursor, a sacrificial intercessor, and, finally, one of its fatal consequences.

As an intercessor in the conflict between her sons, Giocasta, as has been noted,⁴⁸ engages in a paradoxical attempt to ward off death despite having occasioned death through her own

⁴⁷ For his seminal redefinition of Alfierian tragedy as a “teatro delle passioni,” see Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite*, 61. For two studies that privilege the tragic heroine in an analysis of Alfierian tragedy, see Paola Trivero, *Tragiche donne*; and Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*.

⁴⁸ In reference to Giocasta’s opening address to Elettra (“Inorridir di madre al nome io soglio: / Eppur da te caro mi è quasi il nome / Udir di madre” [I, 1, vv. 6-8]), Raffaello Ramat comments on the paradoxical nature of Giocasta’s tragic maternity, which seeks peace but generates death: “Qui c’è un tentativo rattenuto di togliersi dalla fascinazione del fato che offende la sua maternità. Deve inorridire al nome di madre, che

corrupted maternity. Therefore, when Polinice hesitates to betray Creonte by divulging the plot on his life that his uncle has revealed to him, she declares: “Ti assolve il ciel d’ogni tua fè, se rotta / Può risparmiar sangue, e delitti” (III, 3, vv. 233-234). Her efforts to compel Polinice to put his trust in her and thus reveal Eteocle’s planned trick of the poisoned cup are nonetheless undermined by Polinice’s own later retort: “E di costui fratello / Perchè mi festi?” (III, 3, vv. 254-255). Thus the violence Giocasta looks to thwart through her intercession is unavoidable because it is the inevitable consequence of her own perverted maternity.⁴⁹ While in the context of tragic theory the redemptive nature of sacrifice has been argued, along with the positive outcomes engendered by an otherwise destructive sacrificial violence,⁵⁰ the failure of Giocasta’s sacrifice suggests the complex relationship between maternal bodies and the dimensions of Alfierian tragedy in which those bodies assume an often contradictory presence. Attempting to frustrate the impending tragedy, these bodies simultaneously give rise to it through their intervention in the tragic action.⁵¹ Giocasta is a mother closely linked to violence, but her attempts to channel that violence in a

le ricorda la spaventosa catena di orrori cui è legata; ma nessuna forza può impedir ch’ella sia madre” (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 24). Ramat later adds that Giocasta becomes a more poetical tragic figure when she expresses this “desiderio di pace” that constitutes just one half of her motherhood, which is otherwise balanced by an unmistakable horror (Ramat, 24).

⁴⁹ Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 142.

⁵⁰ For a reading of sacrifice as a restorative, redemptive, and generative violence, see Terry Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). For an older reading that dispenses with the political underpinnings of Eagleton’s analysis but nevertheless exhibits strong affinities with the previous study, see Martin Foss, *Death, Sacrifice, and Tragedy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1966). Foss writes with regard to sacrifice: “Sacrifice, even if it is a sacrificial death, is not an end but a transition to a new beginning. It is an offering which in its passing away is somehow preserved because it integrates and intensifies that for which it was an offering” (Foss, 43). Similarly, Eagleton writes: “The most compelling version of sacrifice concerns the flourishing of the self, not its extinction. It involves a formidable release of energy, a transformation of the human subject and a turbulent transitus from death to new life” (Eagleton, *Radical Sacrifice*, 7).

⁵¹ Cf. Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 31-32. Stephanie Laggini Fiore reads Alfierian mothers as peacemakers, who work throughout the tragic action to preserve the family unit.

positive way through self-sacrifice fail to bring about the intended restorative ends. Instead, she becomes a generator of death and violence through her contaminated maternity.⁵²

After Act III, Alfieri has Giocasta accept the failure of her sacrifice and fully yield to her state of anticipatory mourning.⁵³ With her body having been refused as a sacrificial offering, her desire for death now comes to be seen as correlative to the anticipated death of her sons. Once Polinice reveals Eteocle's trickery and feigned peace, she demands that the poisoned cup be given to her so that she might predecease her sons, whose deaths she has been unable to prevent, as well as satisfy her "lungo desir di morte" (IV, 1, v. 163).⁵⁴

As the progression of the tragic action hastens towards its fatal conclusion, the heroine's wrathful grief appears to increase proportionally to the perceived inability of her body to redirect the course of events. Despite the failure of her sacrifice, her maternal body remains a highly visible presence in the tragedy, as Alfieri keeps the tragic mother at the forefront of the tragic action alongside her sons through their shared inclination for violence. As a result, after the discovery of

⁵² Through similar means, Alfieri will engage the idea of corrupted maternity in *Oreste*, in which Clitennestra, torn between her maternal obligations and passion for Egisto, ends her life as a sacrifice on behalf of the tyrant but, in so doing, fails to prevent the demise of the hero, her son.

⁵³ Her opening words in the first scene of Act IV reveal the thanatotic intimations with which her maternal hope has always been suffused:

Numi, se è ver, che della pace il Fausto
Giorno sia questo, a me l'ultimo ei Splenda!
Troppo ardir fora altri implorarne io poscia;
E il mio sperar soverchio anco di questo...

(IV, 1, vv. 1-4)

⁵⁴ Alfieri's contemporary, Melchiorre Cesarotti contends that the most dignified suicides in tragedy are the result of either stabbing or poison, since both are the choice of a "spirito più sedato e più grande." See Cesarotti, "Ragionamento sopra il diletto della tragedia," in vol. 1 of *Opere scelte*, ed. Giuseppe Ortolani (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1945), 287. Nonetheless, Giocasta fails to drink from the poisoned cup and resorts to the characteristically Alfierian method of stabbing in the tragedy's final act. The dignity of her death is subverted by the way in which she plunges the knife into her transgressive womb.

the poisoned cup and the brothers' refusal to reach a peace, Giocasta declares in sententious and ireful resignation:

D'Edippo or figli
Veraci siete, e figli miei. — Ravviso
Le Furie in voi, che al nuzial mio letto
Ebbi pronube già. Ma, il mio misfatto
Già già voi state ad espiar vicini:
Fia dell'incesto il fraticidio ammenda. —

(IV, 1, vv. 200-205)

The heroine's double use of "figli" reinforces the legacy of iniquity that she, no less than Edipo, bequeaths to her sons. In addition, she evokes the Furies, as Alfieri provides mythic scaffolding to tragic action otherwise motivated by the psychological complexities of maternal anguish and instinctual hatred.⁵⁵ Lastly, with her inability to achieve peace through an act of self-sacrifice, Giocasta locates in her sons' fratricide the culmination of the guilt propagated by her corrupted maternity and through which her crime of incest reaches its natural conclusion.

Although Alfieri has posited the failure of her efforts to redirect the course of fated events through the destruction of her maternal body, Giocasta nonetheless occupies a still uneasy presence within the concluding tragic action. In Act IV, scene 2, her ambivalent role within the tragedy is further highlighted when, preparing to face his brother in combat outside the walls of Thebes, Eteocle orders his guards to prevent his mother from leaving the city and coming in between him and Polinice on the battlefield.⁵⁶ Despite her inability to hinder the tragedy's move toward fratricide in a conclusive way, Giocasta is still a potential obstacle to her sons' consummation of

⁵⁵ Roberto Salsano writes: "Il *Polinice* non è soltanto il conflitto di due fratelli, l'uno tiranno, l'altro, per così dire, antitiranno, ma vi compare notevolmente sviluppato il tema dell'amore materno e degli affetti familiari (Giocasta, Antigone) che il potere combattono e svalutano" (Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 14).

⁵⁶ "Guardie, la madre / Della reggia non esca. — Ostacol nullo / Non resta omai" (IV, 2, vv. 231-233).

their animosity, as Alfieri is unable to resolve another contradiction of Giocasta's character in which the impulse toward action must contend with her powerlessness within the fraternal conflict.

This contradiction is reflected in Giocasta's lengthy soliloquy (comprising thirty-nine verses) with which the tragedy's final act opens. Reduced to a state of hopelessness, she nonetheless laments being unable to even witness her sons' fatal duel:

Ahi vile! io vivo ancora? e ancora spero? —
 Che sperar? nulla spero: ah! l'abborrito
 Mio viver, forza è del destin, che vuolmi
 Del fratricidio a parte pria, poi morta.
 Misfatto in Tebe a farsi altro non resta;
 E nol vedria Giocasta?

(V, 1, vv. 6-11)

Although the tragedy takes its name from Polinice, the tragic hero, Alfieri grants Giocasta its most extended soliloquy, thereby calling attention through this rhetorical strategy to the prominent position of the mother in the tragic action. Furthermore, while permitting Alfieri to respect the Aristotelian unity of place by maintaining the Theban palace as the site of the tragic action, Giocasta's soliloquy communicates the horror of the combat between Polinice and Eteocle occurring outside the palace walls and which is related only secondhand to spectators through the account later provided by Antigone. The soliloquy further suggests the tragic mother as the pivotal figure on whom the psychological dimensions of the tragedy depend. Lastly, in her soliloquy, Giocasta claims both sons as her own, the hero and tyrant alike, in another indication of her ambivalent participation in the tragic action. Unable to choose between them, she accepts both as the fatal consequences of her transgressive maternity, as Alfieri returns to, and indeed stresses, this maternity as the central catalyst for the hostility between Polinice and Eteocle. She thus cries out: "Per chi far voti? / Qual vincitor bramar? — Nessuno: entrambi / Miei figli sono" (V, 1, vv. 29-31).

At the conclusion of the tragedy, with the mortally wounded Eteocle and victorious Polinice reunited with their mother, Giocasta inserts herself once more in the conflict. Seeking one last time to engender peace between her sons, she beseeches Polinice to embrace his dying brother:

O figliuol mio,
Non negare al fratel l'ultimo abbraccio.
Breve n'hai tempo; alla tua fama toglì
Tal macchia....

(V, 3, vv. 190-193)

If previously in the final act Alfieri filtered the horror of the fatal combat between Polinice and Eteocle through the maternal perspective offered by Giocasta's soliloquy, here he transforms the tragic mother into the agent of the tragedy's horrendous denouement: Eteocle seals his last embrace of Polinice by fatally stabbing his brother in a perversion of his mother's wishes.⁵⁷ Earlier in the tragedy Giocasta had declared herself the sole "arbitra" between her sons (I, 3, v. 185). Here endeavoring once more to correct the failure of her attempt at an expiatory sacrifice, she meets with yet another failure. As a mother rendered monstrous by her incestuous union with Edipo, she instigates rather than prevents violence within the dimensions of the tragedy. However, her continued efforts to stem the progression of this violence highlight not simply the maternal delusions to which she is subject, as has been argued,⁵⁸ but also the ambivalence of the "vera madre" whose character is founded on a number of irresolvable contradictions that see her attempts at peacekeeping irredeemably perverted by violence and death. As a result, the heroine becomes a

⁵⁷ Reading Racine's *La Thébaïde* through France's evolving attitude toward the law of primogeniture, Richard Goodkin remarks that this gesture is a "parody of inheritance" since there is a power struggle for inheritance within the same generation as opposed to between two different generations. See Goodkin, *Birth Marks: The Tragedy of Primogeniture in Pierre Corneille, Thomas Corneille, and Jean Racine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 166.

⁵⁸ For an analysis of the way in which Alfieri heightens Giocasta's hope for a peaceful resolution to the tragic conflict through contrast with Antigone's more astute and disconsolate understanding of the situation, see Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 31-34

complex figure who resists precise categorizations, as she fails to correspond to Alfieri's own description of her in the *Parere sulle tragedie*.

After witnessing her sons' fratricidal demise,⁵⁹ Giocasta is compelled toward her own death and confronts her guilt one final time in the arrival of her husband's shade, whose grisly form still bears the wounds inflicted by Edipo:

Di morte i negri
Regni profondi spalancarsi io veggio....
Ombra di Lajo lurida, le braccia
A me tu sporgi? A scellerata moglie?

(V, 3, vv. 207-210)

Her macabre evocation of hell and her adjuration to Laio to separate her sons descended to the infernal realm in a mortal embrace,⁶⁰ has prompted Mario Fubini to describe Alfieri's focus on Giocasta as superfluous and her final speech a "vera e propria stonatura" that detracts from the tragic solemnity of the deaths of Polinice and Eteocle.⁶¹ Yet in his return to Giocasta at the conclusion of the tragedy, Alfieri consigns the tragic action to the horrifying aegis of the iniquitous, mournful, and pathetic mother with whom the tragedy opens.⁶² Put differently, it is the singular, corrupted maternal body of Giocasta which comes to inscribe the tragedy otherwise dedicated to the tragic ideological contrasts between Polinice and Eteocle. Additionally, the heroine's attempt

⁵⁹ She declares: "Ecco perfetta è l'opra" (V, 3, v. 201).

⁶⁰ "O Lajo, / Deh! dividili tu" (V, 3, vv. 221-222).

⁶¹ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 216. Cf. Salsano, *Saggio sul Polinice alfieriano*, 96. Salsano is less disparaging in his appraisal of Alfieri's decision to conclude the tragedy with Giocasta in contrast with Racine, who closes the *Thébaïde* with Creonte: "Il finale alfieriano rapportato a Giocasta sposta l'asse ideologico della catarsi tragica tendente in Alfieri a recuperare la spiritualità greca evidenziando l'inesorabile epilogo dell'odio divino che colpisce un'intera famiglia e di questa, a conclusione, la più sofferente protagonista: la madre sventurata" (Salsano, 96).

⁶² Richard Goodkin observes that Jocaste's suicide is "anticlimactic" in Racine's *La Thébaïde* and that it precedes the deaths of Etéocle and Polynice (Goodkin, *Birth Marks*, 164). Alfieri effects something dramatically very different in his tragedy by having Giocasta die last.

at sacrifice proves a failure, incapable of deterring her sons from fratricide; nonetheless, the tragic mother is not a figure devoid of agency, relegated to the perimeter of the tragedy. Indeed, animated by an ambivalent maternity, Giocasta's interventions within the tragic action not only precipitate but engender the tragedy's fatal outcome. Thus, in a tragedy granted the name of the tragic hero, she exists in tension with her sons alongside whom she uneasily occupies a large share of the tragic action, which simultaneously attempts to eject her and draw her ever more deeply within its fatal progression. With her sons' monstrosity an extension of her own corrupted maternity, she is never able to reconcile her status as a mother stained by incest with the more benevolent idea of motherhood that allows her to believe that she can expiate the crimes of her house through the sacrifice of her maternal body.⁶³ She thus emerges by the tragedy's end as a mother who is both a monster and a martyr, mournful and wrathful, who in a highly significant gesture presents her guilty womb to be eviscerated by the bloody scourge of the Fury Aletto.⁶⁴

As if to confirm her ambivalent presence within *Polinice*, Alfieri concludes the tragedy with Antigone's despairing exclamation: "Oh madre!..." (V, 3, v. 228).⁶⁵ The tragedy thus lingers

⁶³ Benjamin writes that "death is not a punishment but atonement, an expression of the subjection of guilty life to the law of natural life" (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 131). In positing Giocasta's suicide as a failure of maternal proportions, with her body denied the fulfillment of its desire for an expiatory sacrifice, Alfieri would appear to refute this.

⁶⁴ Nicole Loraux argues that suicide by hanging was largely a women's death in ancient Greek tragedy, in *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 9. Furthermore, women who killed themselves in this manner often did so off-stage, within the confines of the home, emphasizing the shameful nature of death by rope (Loraux, 21-23). Nonetheless, by having Giocasta make recourse to the sword instead of the traditional rope, Alfieri recuperates the unconventional method of death Euripides assigns to Jocasta in the *Phoenician Women*, and subverts the classical approach to killing women in tragedy by making the female body highly visible, and unavoidable, in its final moments.

⁶⁵ Cf. Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 147-148. Laura Nay argues that Alfieri prepares for the successive *Antigone* by having Antigone take her mother in her arms and exclaim over her dead body; as such, it is the image of the young heroine, as opposed to that of the mother, with which Alfieri concludes the tragedy.

at its close on the maternal figure, who is presented in the tragic action as a failure, and in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, elliptically, as a “vera madre,” and yet whose contradictions give the tragedy much of its animating thrust.

II.2. Competing Sacrifices: Clitennestra as Mother and Lover in *Oreste*

Alfieri conceived the tragedy *Oreste* alongside *Agamennone* on the same day in 1776, versifying the work two years later in 1778. In the *Vita*, he writes that although the idea for the two tragedies emerged from his reading of Seneca, he was dismayed to find that Voltaire had already tried his hand at treating the mythic story with the tragedy *Oreste* (1750).⁶⁶ It was only on the advice of his cherished friend Francesco Gandellini Gori, who suggested not reading Voltaire's tragedy so as not to be unconsciously influenced by it, that Alfieri, still in pursuit of artistic maturity, decided to continue on with his plan to compose his own *Oreste*.⁶⁷ This sense of competition that he felt toward his tragic contemporary Voltaire anticipates his later rivalry with Scipione Maffei, whom he directly challenged, along with the French *philosophe*, through his own take on the tragic story of Merope.

However, the impact of Voltaire's *Oreste* on Alfieri's tragedy cannot be so easily dismissed despite Alfieri's efforts to present an image of himself as a tragedian writing independently of contemporary influences. He was likely, in fact, very familiar with Voltaire's tragedy.⁶⁸ Furthermore, in 1783, Louise Stolberg-Gedern, Alfieri's life companion, compared the two tragedies and individuated an important difference in their respective portrayals of Clitennestra.

⁶⁶ “Nell’inverno poi, trovandomi io in Torino, squadernando un giorno i miei libri, mi venne aperto un volume delle tragedie del Voltaire, dove la prima parola che mi si presentò fu, *Oreste tragedia*. Chiusi subito il libro, indispettito di ritrovarmi un tal competitore fra i moderni, di cui non avea mai saputo che questa tragedia esistesse. Ne domandai allora ad alcuni, e mi dissero esser quella una delle buone tragedie di quell’autore; il che mi avea molto raffreddato nell’intenzione di dar corpo alla mia,” Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, vol. 1, ed. Luigi Fassò (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1981), 206-207.

⁶⁷ Alfieri adds that Gori also declined to loan him a copy of Voltaire's tragedy, writing: “Il Gori, negandomi l’imprestito dell’*Oreste* francese, soggiunse: ‘Scriva il suo senza legger quello; e se ella è nato per fare tragedie, il suo sarà o peggiore o migliore od uguale a quell’altro *Oreste*, ma sarà almeno ben suo’. E così feci” (Alfieri, 207).

⁶⁸ Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 80-81.

Alfieri's heroine, Louise notes, "è più madre che in Voltaire."⁶⁹ This distinction instantiates Alfieri's recurring interest in the figure of the tragic mother through whom he could not only distinguish himself from his contemporaries writing in the tragic genre, but also realize what Paola Trivero has termed the "potenzialità tragiche" of his heroines.⁷⁰

With his return to Clitennestra in *Oreste*, Alfieri diversifies the figure of the sacrificial mother and portrays her as a woman unable to reconcile maternal sentiment with a desperate, and ultimately fatal, concupiscence. While Giocasta is unwaveringly impartial in her love for her bellicose sons, Clitennestra is a more mercurial presence, aligning herself, alternately, with her children and her lover, now consort, throughout the tragic action. The maternal component of her divisions of character, which were previously represented in *Agamennone*, is now emphasized, as Alfieri founds the queen's struggle within the dimensions of the tragedy on her competing identities as both mother to the eponymous hero and wife to the tyrant Egisto. It is this bipolarity emerging from the contrast between her maternal and prurient desires which renders her a "carattere difficilissimo" for Alfieri, who writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that "dovendo ella esservi *Or moglie or madre, e non mai moglie o madre* e ciò era più facile a dirsi in un verso, che a maneggiarsi per lo spazio di cinque atti."⁷¹ Nonetheless, it is precisely in part due to the increased

⁶⁹ Louise Stolberg-Gedern, "Tragedia d'*Oreste* di Psipio paragonata con quella di Voltaire da Psipsia," in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 485. Alfieri and Louise fondly referred to each other by the epithets Psipio and Psipsia.

⁷⁰ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 6.

⁷¹ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101.

emphasis on Clitennestra's maternity⁷² that he is able to offer a more generous appraisal of his creation. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, he concludes:

Io credo nondimeno, che questa seconda Clitennestra, attesi i rimorsi terribili ch'ella prova, i pessimi trattamenti ch'ella riceve da Egisto, e le orribili perplessità in cui vive, possa ispirare assai più compassione di lei, che la Clitennestra dell'*Agamennone*; e credo che lo spettatore la possa giudicare quasi abbastanza punita dalla orridezza del presente suo stato.⁷³

According to Alfieri, the Clitennestra of *Oreste* is a woman tormented by guilt for her role in Agamennone's death. She is also subject to mistreatment by Egisto, whose disdain for her is now no longer concealed. Her irreconcilable duality as both mother and lover, murderess and maltreated consort, produces in her the "orribili perplessità" with which she will contend throughout the tragic action. As such, she earns more compassion from Alfieri, who had earlier dismissed the Clitennestra of *Agamennone* as merely a "madre pur tanto insana" due to her blind passion for Egisto and her submission to his wiles.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, appearing in two tragedies, Clitennestra emerges as one of the tragedian's most psychologically complex and multifaceted heroines, and thus resistant to facile categorizations.⁷⁵ While in *Polinice* Alfieri emphasizes the corporeal nature of Giocasta's blighted maternity, placing the corrupted maternal body at the center of the tragic action, in *Oreste*, he insists, rather, on the psychic turmoil Clitennestra experiences as a woman unable to relinquish her passion for the tyrant on behalf of her children. This incoherence of

⁷² In *Agamennone*, Clitennestra's motherhood is downplayed. The traditional motivating factor of Iphigenia's death is subordinated to her passion for Egisto as the tragic action builds toward the king's murder.

⁷³ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101.

⁷⁴ Alfieri, 98.

⁷⁵ While both *Antigone* and *Elettra*, like Clitennestra, each feature in two tragedies, it is only Clitennestra who can be considered the protagonist in both of the tragedies in which she appears. As such, Alfieri devotes ample space to exploring her psychological characterization, rendering her a character more complexly and richly articulated across two tragedies than either *Antigone* or *Elettra*.

character renders her tragic. Deepening the associations he earlier established between maternity and sacrifice in *Polinice*, in which Giocasta is caught between two opposing visions of motherhood, one pure and the other profane, Alfieri posits Clitennestra as another failed sacrifice, this time through her decision to defend Egisto as opposed to her son. If Giocasta's inability to sacrifice herself in order to thwart the dual fratricide of Polinice and Eteocle precipitates, and even engenders, the tragedy's fatal conclusion, Clitennestra's refusal to capitulate to the dictates of a sacrificial maternity also makes her a key player within the progression of the tragic action. Her ambivalent maternity becomes a force fundamental to the unfolding of the tragedy.

With Clitennestra, Alfieri returns to and diversifies the vision of motherhood earlier presented with Giocasta. Like the latter mother, she frequently weeps throughout the tragedy and engages a process of mourning. But where Giocasta's lamentations and tears reflect, in part, her premonitory grief over her sons' unpreventable demise, Clitennestra's own tears, with which she is associated from her very first appearance in *Oreste*, are a reaction to Agamennone's murder, with which the previous, eponymous tragedy concludes. As has been argued, this confirms a psychological coherence between the Clitennestra of *Agamennone* and the Clitennestra of *Oreste*, despite Alfieri's disparaging remarks about the queen in his commentary on the former tragedy.⁷⁶

In Act 1, scene 2 of *Oreste*, intercepted by Elettra on her way to the king's tomb on the anniversary of his murder, Clitennestra uses her tears and mourning to bridge the gap of ten years separating the two tragedies: "Scorsi due lustri / Son da quel dì fatale; il mio delitto / Due lustri interi or piango" (vv. 33-35). If Giocasta's tears derive from the knowledge of her inability to alter the Oedipal line's adverse destiny and by which her maternity has been stained by incest, her

⁷⁶ Ines Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1926), 67. Ines Ceccoli asserts: "Nell'*Oreste* Clitennestra è tormentata dal martirio incessante del rimorso: questo aspetto porta una continuità e coerenza di sviluppo dalla Clitennestra dell'*Agamennone*" (Ceccoli, 67).

attempts to do so notwithstanding, Clitennestra's tears stem from her active and knowing participation in Agamennone's murder, an act in which fate played a role secondary to her own contested demand for autonomy within the tragic action.⁷⁷ Giocasta's tears thus align her more closely with the figure of the *mater dolorosa* than Clitennestra's own weeping links her to the mournful maternal trope. The difference between the two weeping women lies in the fact that Clitennestra's tears stem from her considerations of her corrupted motherhood and her despair over Agamennone's death, but are also motivated by the desperate passion which compelled her to the crime and which she refuses to give up. In *Oreste*, Alfieri portrays Clitennestra as a woman humbled by grief and diminished by her sense of guilt. Indeed, he insists on the queen's abjection in her initial exchanges with Elettra. Haunted by nocturnal visions of the slain Agamennone, as she will later go on to describe, she declares to her daughter: "Già in vita tutti i rei tormenti io provo / Del tenebroso Averno" (I, 2, vv. 69-70). Elettra, however, reacts coldly to her mother's tears⁷⁸ and prompts from her the following despairing response:

O figlia,
Deh! m'odi;... aspetta.... Io son misera assai.
Mi abborro più, che tu non m'odj.... Egisto,
Tardi il conobbi... Oimè!.. che dico? appena
Estinto Atride, atroce appien quant'era
Conobbi Egisto; eppure ancor lo amai.
Di rimorso e d'amor miste ad un tempo

⁷⁷ Cf. Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 67. Raffaello Ramat insists on Clitennestra's, along with the other characters', complete submission to fate in both *Oreste* and the earlier *Agamennone*: "Eppure, nella linea dell'ispirazione alfieriana, l'*Agamennone* e l'*Oreste* si direbbero quasi due eccezioni. Ben alfieriano senza dubbio è il senso dell'enorme, del fatale, e ben alfieriana è la desolazione che sta intorno a quei personaggi travolti in gorgi senza luce, atomi in preda a cieche forze meccaniche. Ma se l'Alfieri è il poeta dell'eroico in quanto volontario, qui dove sono gli eroi? Di fronte alle forze misteriose, alla tirannia del fato, al comando del sangue, gli uomini non han che cosa opporre, e soggiacciono: non il trionfo della libertà è il canto che ora inebbia il poeta. Abbiam veduto che né Clitennestra né Agamennone né lo stesso Egisto—nell'una—né Oreste ed Elettra—nell'altra tragedia—si armano contro il fato; ma obbediscono, o vengono travolti, ignari, o, marmorei, osservano. L'uccisione di Agamennone e quella d'Egisto sono volontarie per modo di dire: in ogni modo non affermano, com'è nel più vero Alfieri, il trionfo dell'*io* purificato e liberato" (Ramat, 67).

⁷⁸ Elettra responds: "Pianger di te, nol deggio; e meno io deggio / Credere al pianger tuo" (I, 2, vv. 92-93).

Provai le furie,... e provo. Oh degno stato
 Di me soltanto!... Qual mercè mi renda
 Del suo delitto Egisto, appien lo veggo:
 Veggo il disprezzo in falso amor ravvolto:
 Ma, a tal son io; che omai qual posso ammenda
 Far del misfatto, che non sia misfatto?

(I, 2, vv. 94-106)

Displaying once more the penchant for self-knowledge that she revealed in the previous tragedy, Clitennestra confesses her personal failings and acknowledges the tyrant's, and now her consort's, disdain for her, in addition to Elettra's own repugnance of her as mother. This last, however, does not approach the level of hatred she feels for herself. She is thus a woman reviled and rejected as a result of her adulterous love and the consequent murder of Agamennone.⁷⁹ Although her character will soon be subject to the same psychic disarrangement and inconsistencies with which it was beset in the previous tragedy, she is cognizant of her own degradation whose signs must manifest themselves in perpetuity. Giocasta reflects in a likewise manner on her own debasement throughout *Polinice*. It is a pattern of deeply interiorized reflection that Alfieri almost exclusively links to the female figure and continues in Antigone and Mirra; none of his male characters, villains and heroes alike, apart from perhaps the antihero Saul, exhibit a comparable tendency toward reflection on personal limitations and guilt.⁸⁰ This proclivity for reflection, even as displayed by Antigone and Mirra, is often closely connected to a defiled or otherwise peccable maternity

⁷⁹ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 87. "La tragedia di Clitennestra, pertanto, è nella consapevolezza di essere diventata la colpa stessa e di sentirsi, per questo, rifiutata come madre, come sposa e come amante" (Trovato, 87).

⁸⁰ Cf. Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 190-210. Mario Fubini maintains that the tragic action of *Oreste* is propelled by "passioni gigantesche," an interpretation that runs somewhat contrary to this study's understanding of Clitennestra as a character prone to *reflections* on guilt: "Non da una riflessione nasce l'*Oreste*, ma da un sentimento tutto istintivo di ammirazione e di orrore per le passioni gigantesche, che si riversano nell'azione enorme e frenetica" (Fubini, 210).

(Antigone is the product of incest, and Mirra's impure passion for her father is attributed, at least superficially, to Cecri's boasts at the goddess Venere's expense).

However, despite the iniquitous manner in which they were born, none of Giocasta's children, not even Eteocle, condemn the corrupted maternal figure as severely as Elettra, who advises her mother in the same breath⁸¹:

Alto morire ogni misfatto ammenda,
 Ma, poichè al petto tuo tu non torcesti
 L'acciar del sangue marital fumante;
 Poichè in te stessa il braccio parricida
 L'usato ardir perdea; perchè il tuo ferro
 Non rivolgesti, o non rivolgi, al seno
 Di quell'empio, che a te l'onor, la pace,
 La fama toglie, ed al tuo Oreste il regno?

(I, 2, vv. 107-114)

In unequivocal terms, Elettra advises her mother to die nobly or to slay Egisto if she seeks expiation for Agamennone's murder. Death as a solution to Clitennestra's guilt has been recognized, with Mario Trovato arguing that with *Oreste*, and in the queen's case in particular, Alfieri depicts the "situazione dell'uomo dopo il peccato" and the remorseful individual's need to reclaim "i diritti perduti e i limiti umani, imposti da una forza superiore."⁸² With Clitennestra, what has been lost as a result of her murder of Agamennone, and her complete submission to her desire for Egisto, is her right to claim for herself the status of mother. She has also lost a coherent identity, as Alfieri himself recognizes in his evocation in the *Parere sulle tragedie* of Elettra's often-cited line

⁸¹ Stephanie Laggini Fiore writes that while neither Elettra nor Oreste manages to empathize with Clitennestra in the tragedy, their condemnation of her is not "entirely implacable," as Elettra's scornful pity and Oreste's despair after her murder demonstrate (Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 135).

⁸² Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 84.

describing the queen as “Or madre, or moglie; e non mai moglie, o madre” (II, 2, v. 312).⁸³ It is not inconsequential to note that Elettra’s description commences with Clitennestra as mother rather than with Clitennestra as wife, suggesting that for Alfieri the queen’s character suffers from a loss of integrity principally due to her inability to reconcile her status as mother with her status as wife, as opposed to the other way around. Although forced to contend with two opposing visions of her own maternity, Giocasta’s status as mother is never in doubt within her own tragedy. Clitennestra’s, on the other hand, is repeatedly called into question given her loyalty, albeit wavering until the tragedy’s end, to Egisto.

In Act I, scene 3, Clitennestra attempts to defend Elettra against Egisto, imploring: “Egisto, ah! pensa / Ch’ella m’è figlia...” (vv. 149-150). The tyrant’s response, however, undercuts her maternal ties to her daughter by giving precedence to Elettra’s descent from Agamennone: “Ella? d’Atride è figlia” (I, 3, v. 150). Egisto will engage in a similar denial of Clitennestra’s maternity when he later declares with regard to Oreste: “Non è tuo sangue Oreste: impuro avanzo / È del sangue d’Atréo” (I, 4, vv. 246-247). Finally, the hero himself will raise the question of her motherhood when he asserts to Elettra that Egisto’s death will decide Clitennestra’s identity as mother:

Ma pure ella debb’oggi, o madre, o moglie
Essere, il de’; quando al suo fianco, a terra
Cader vedrà da me trafitto il reo
Vile adultero suo.

⁸³ Laura Nay notes that in the *Parere sulle tragedie* Alfieri inverts Elettra’s words, placing “moglie” ahead of “madre.” Nay attributes this inversion to the different perspectives on the character of Clitennestra that are held by Elettra and Oreste within the tragedy and by Alfieri himself. Where her children privilege her identity as mother over that of wife to the tyrant, Alfieri, instead, “mette al primo posto l’essere moglie perché è l’essere moglie del tiranno che l’ha spinta a uccidere il suo legittimo sposo rendendola personaggio fortemente tragico e dunque inducendo il lettore/spettatore a compatirla” (Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 176-177). According to Nay, Alfieri believed that Clitennestra’s troubled status as mother was only a subsidiary concern of her tragedy; furthermore, for Alfieri writing in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, it is as a wife, not as a mother, that the reader or spectator finds just cause to pity Clitennestra.

(II, 2, vv. 318-321)

If Mario Trovato argues that Clitennestra's tragedy in *Oreste* owes itself to her awareness of her transformation into the "colpa stessa,"⁸⁴ her guilt must be differentiated from that of Giocasta, another tragic woman who embodies and identifies herself with guilt in an abstract sense.⁸⁵ Whereas Giocasta associates her guilt with a maternity stained by the ancient crime of incest, whose consequences are nevertheless seen in her sons' mutual enmity, Clitennestra renews and reinforces her guilt through her connubial link to the tyrant.⁸⁶ As such, Elettra suggests that her mother submit to an honorable death in order to amend not only the past crime of Agamennone's murder but, so too, the current and ongoing crime of her marriage to Egisto from which has resulted Oreste's exile and her own loss of reputation and peace of mind. Once again, as in *Polinice*, Alfieri links the corrupted maternal body to death; furthermore, the tragedy comes to be motivated by this same body's failure to achieve a death viewed as propitiative, that is, intended to bring about a resolution to tragic conflict. Instead, as in the case of Giocasta, albeit not without its significant dissimilarities, Clitennestra's failure to give herself up in a curative and honorable death strengthens the fatal progression of the tragic action.

Alfieri associates Clitennestra's maternal body with death in another way. Stricken with remorse over the murder of Agamennone and the subsequent exile of Oreste, the queen is

⁸⁴ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 87.

⁸⁵ While Giocasta and Clitennestra approach their personal guilt differently, Pino Mensi writes that Clitennestra does suggest affinities with Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth in her guilt and her continued evocation of the blood she has spilled. See Mensi, *Gli affetti nella tragedia di Vittorio Alfieri* (Padua: CEDAM, 1974), 102.

⁸⁶ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 98-99. "Con l'*Oreste* abbiamo l'estrema conclusione di una ricerca che si è andata sempre più focalizzando sulla causa degli istinti e delle passioni, da cui l'uomo, secondo Alfieri, trae i motivi del suo comportamento privato, sociale e politico" (Trovato, 98).

overcome with bitterness due to her miserable situation.⁸⁷ After Egisto reminds her of her role in the king's death, her acrimonious retort⁸⁸ prompts Elettra to express her hope that Clitennestra's unexpected rage might lead to the mutual bloodshed of the queen and her consort in atonement for their crimes: "Possa lo sprezzo trarvi / All'odio; l'odio a nuovo sangue" (I, 3, vv. 165-166). Elettra's exclamation reveals the tension between love and odium underlying Clitennestra's character, as the queen vacillates between the two emotions (and not only in regard to Egisto but also her children). She thus becomes for Alfieri a woman more compassionate due to the resulting psychic confusion that locates a key difference, with respect to the mental disorientation she exhibits in the preceding *Agamennone*, in its deriving from her firm embrace of her own guilt and Egisto's overt disdain for her. Additionally, Elettra's hope that the tyrant and her mother might come to deadly blows invests the queen with a vulnerability of a type not seen in Alfieri's portrayal of Giocasta. In *Polinice*, despite the latter woman's attempt to offer herself up as sacrifice, even demanding that her sons plunge their swords into her iniquitous womb, the maternal body is no less sacrosanct than it is an object of horror. It is this paradox which renders Giocasta's body simultaneously repellant and inviolable to her sons. Instead, in *Oreste*, Clitennestra is a mother threatened with murder; she offers a motherhood degraded not merely by the ancient killing of Agamennone but by its very partiality towards her offspring. As previously seen, it is Giocasta's impartiality towards Polinice and Eteocle which enables Alfieri to refer to her, elliptically but nonetheless admiringly, as a "vera madre" in the *Parere sulle tragedie*. However, due to

⁸⁷ In her bitterness, the Alfierian Clitennestra finds herself linked to the Euripidean Clytemnestra, who expresses dissatisfaction with her present condition following Agamemnon's murder and her subsequent marriage to Aegisthus.

⁸⁸ "Oh rampogna mortal! Ch'altro più manca / Alla infelice misera mia vita? / Chi mi vi ha spinto, or mi rimorde il fallo" (I, 3, vv. 156-158).

Clitennestra's devotion to the tyrant, her maternal body comes to lack the untouchability of Giocasta's within the tragic action. As a result, Egisto can declare in reference to the coming of the vengeful Oreste: "Ognor sul capo / Ti pende il brando suo" (I, 3, vv. 235-236); and then add sententiously: "Ciò spetta a te, misera madre" (I, 3, v. 244).

Oreste has been recognized as a tragedy of matricidal revenge that nonetheless privileges and humanizes the guilty mother within the tragic action.⁸⁹ Clitennestra's awareness and acceptance of her own culpability enable her to welcome the portended arrival of Oreste rather than merely fear it as in classical tradition.⁹⁰ In fact, much like Giocasta who offers her guilty womb to be mutilated by her sons in an expiatory gesture, Clitennestra suggests that she would offer her breast to Oreste's sword: "E in questo petto a vendicare il padre / Lascia ch'ei venga. Altro maggior delitto, / Se maggior v'ha, forse espiar de' il mio" (I, 3, vv. 256-258). Once more,

⁸⁹ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes that the tragic action of *Oreste* "non ha altro motore, non sviluppa né ammette altra passione, che una implacabil vendetta" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 99). For two readings that privilege the characterization of Clitennestra within this exploration of Oreste's matricidal revenge, see Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 84-102; and Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 163-182. Cf. Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, pages 190-210. While Mario Fubini writes that Clitennestra is considered "la figura poeticamente più viva della tragedia" (Fubini, 192), he nonetheless argues that *Oreste* is a tragedy interested in a powerful, and yet general, examination of instinctive sentiments and passions as opposed to a careful delineation of character psychology. As a result, for Fubini, Clitennestra and the other characters "mal si descrivono uno per uno nelle loro caratteristiche psicologiche" (Fubini, 90).

⁹⁰ Clytemnestra fears the coming of Orestes as punishment for the killing of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*. Her nightmares lead her to present offerings at the tomb of the murdered king, and she welcomes with poorly concealed delight the news that Orestes has been killed. There is little trace of the maternal in her. Similar nightmares afflict the Clytemnestra of Sophocles' *Electra* who prepares for offerings to be burnt at Agamemnon's grave in order to assuage her guilt. While Sophocles portrays Clytemnestra as mother enough to suggest that she is slightly affected by the report of Orestes' death, the queen swiftly goes on to add that with Orestes' passing she is now freed from fear of both him and his devoted sister, who is abused, neglected, and yet animated by the hope that Orestes still lives. Finally, in Euripides' *Electra*, Clytemnestra is not assailed by any dark dreams of Agamemnon's otherworldly retribution, but it is mentioned in passing by the heroine that she would not welcome Orestes' return. However, this Clytemnestra is portrayed as capable of small maternal kindnesses: despite condemning Electra to a life of penury in her forced marriage to a poor farmer, the queen arrives to attend to her daughter, believing reports that the young woman has just given birth. She thus enters into the fatal trap Electra, Orestes, and Agamemnon's old loyal servant have laid for her.

it is through the destruction of her reprehensible maternal body that the guilty mother might atone for her crimes. Nonetheless, Clitennestra differs notably from Giocasta due to her vacillations of spirit. Immediately following her declaration that she would give herself up to her son's sword, she insists:

Oreste il piè volgere ad Argo
 Non ardirebbe; e s'ei venisse, io scudo
 Col mio petto ti fora.... Ma, s'ei viene,
 Il ciel vel tragge; e contro il ciel chi vale?
 Qual dubbio allor? Vittima chiesta io sono.

(I, 3, vv. 263-267)

Clitennestra's desire for atonement at the hands of her son is undermined by her continued allegiance to Egisto whom she will shield with her own mortal body as a willing victim, or "vittima chiesta." In *Oreste*, Alfieri concerns himself less with the material aspects of a culpable maternity than in *Polinice*. In the latter tragedy, Giocasta's incestuous union with Edipo is underscored by her many references to her "ventre infame," whereas the legitimate births of Elettra and Oreste do not permit Alfieri to treat Clitennestra's maternal body with the same tragically intense specificity. However, he returns to the metaphorized maternal body in *Oreste* through Clitennestra's description of herself as a "scudo," or shield, meant to be given up as a sacrifice on behalf of her consort. If Giocasta presents herself as a "scudo" in defense of her sons, Clitennestra subverts, and indeed perverts, this same metaphor by offering up her body in order to spare the life of the tyrant, thus calling into question her previous generous invitation to Oreste to slay her and to allow her, therefore, to atone for her transgressions. As Raffaello Ramat argues, Clitennestra "non sa morire altamente; il suo desiderio di morte è un sospiro non una decisione, un'ansia di volontà non una volontà."⁹¹ This oscillation between villainy and heroism, which defines her character in the two

⁹¹ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 64.

tragedies in which she appears and transforms her into their true protagonist, complicates the metaphor of the “scudo” that Alfieri earlier utilized in his portrayal of Giocasta.⁹² While in *Polinice* the metaphor represents the guilty mother’s bid to redirect the forces of fate in a tragedy that thwarts her every attempt at intervention, in *Oreste* it comes to represent the instability of the maternal presence within a tragedy in which the mother is, by necessity, a central consideration and yet exercises a seemingly more passive role. In other words, she does not often appear to situate herself in opposition to the disastrous trajectory of the tragic action, but, rather, in her tortured loyalty to Egisto, seemingly aligns herself with it. The apparent passivity of the maternal presence in the tragedy as embodied by the metaphor of the “scudo” can be seen in the following, almost offhand comment made by Oreste to his companion Pilade: “E di qual ferro usbergo, / Qual scudo avrà, ch’io nol trapassi, Egisto?” (II, 1, vv. 73-74). In another departure from classical versions of the Oresteian myth, Alfieri has the hero merely intend to avenge Agamennone’s death by slaying Egisto alone, making Clitennestra’s subsequent demise an accidental byproduct of Oreste’s vendetta.⁹³ This ambivalent treatment of the mother substantiates the difficulty acknowledged by the tragedian in his portrayal of Clitennestra. She is a paradoxical figure, caught in an ethical bind while being forced to navigate antinomical relationships with the tragedy’s male

⁹² Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, “Lo spettacolo del Tiranno: le tragedie dell’Alfieri,” in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi in memoria di Carlo Palmisano. San Salvatore Monferrato, 22-24 settembre 1983*, ed. Giovanna Ioli (San Salvatore Monferrato-Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria-Regione Piemonte, 1985), 121. Squarotti writes: “La vera protagonista delle due tragedie alfieriane dedicate agli Atridi è, infatti, Clitennestra, seguita negli ondeggiamenti, nelle incertezze, negli scatti, nei cedimenti, nelle debolezze dell’amore, fino, sì, a uccidere Agamennone, ma anche a farsi uccidere dal figlio per cercare di difendere e salvare Egisto” (Squarotti, 121). Cf. Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 191. Mario Fubini maintains that it is Oreste’s quest for vengeance which becomes the true protagonist of the tragedy.

⁹³ Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all portray Clytemnestra’s death at Orestes’s hand as deliberate. The queen’s accidental murder is an innovation first proposed in the *Électre* by Hilaire-Bernard de Requeleyne, baron de Longepierre, in 1702. See Nicolò Mineo, “Oreste,” in *Alfieri tragico*, eds. Enrico Ghidetti and Roberta Turchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2004), 507.

figures: the tyrant, also her consort, and the hero, also her son. Her allegiance to Egisto threatens to negate her motherhood, and yet it is through this selfsame motherhood that the tragedy is invested with its greatest weight. Her contradictions can be summed up in the following exchange between Oreste and Elettra:

ORESTE	In lei, Dimmi, fidar nulla potremmo?
ELETTRA	Ah! nulla. Benchè fra 'l vizio e la virtude ondeggi, Si attiene al vizio ognora. ... Meco ella piange, è vero; Ma col tiranno sta.

(II, 2, vv. 338-341, 343-344)

Clitennestra herself acknowledges her own contradictory presence within the tragedy when she remarks on her marriage to Egisto: “È ver: con lui felice / Non sono io mai: ma nè senz’esso il sono” (III, 1, vv. 14-15). Her lucidity of mind shows itself in her awareness of the psychic divisions to which she is subject. At one point, she admits: “Me stessa invan cerco ingannar...” (III, 2, v. 18); then quickly, in the following scene, she exclaims: “Amo, Egisto, pur troppo!” (III, 3, v. 20). It is a line uttered within earshot of her own son, disguised as an emissary who has been sent to bear news of Oreste’s death on behalf of Strofio, king of Phocis, who harbored the hero following Agamennone’s murder and raised him alongside his son, Pilade. Clitennestra’s cognizance of her own personal limitations, which see her juxtapose admissions of her inextinguishable passion for Egisto with effusions of maternal sentiment, contrasts with Oreste’s own withering appraisal of his mother; he unequivocally associates her with Egisto’s tyranny.

Disguised and bidden by Clitennestra to share with her the news concerning Oreste’s death, news originally intended to be revealed first to her consort, the hero states with barely concealed

rage: “Egisto ed essa, un’alma / Sono in duo corpi” (III, 3, vv. 43-44). Despite the line’s ostensible meaning, i.e. in Egisto’s absence, the messengers are free to divulge their information to his queen, the subtext is clear. Yet Oreste’s effort to deny Clitennestra her maternity, relinquished through her relation to the tyrant, is undermined by her own embrace of her maternal status following the false report of her son’s death. When the disguised hero suggests that Oreste’s end guarantees Egisto’s safety,⁹⁴ Clitennestra admonishes the messenger: “Ah! taci. / D’Oreste pria fui madre” (III, 3, vv. 68-69). Her claim to possession of a motherhood which preexists and takes precedence over her union with the tyrant is addressed once more in her lengthy soliloquy in the following scene. In grief for her fallen son, she laments the distance which prevented her from performing the necessary final rites over his dead body, and then exclaims:

Che dico? eran mie mani
 Da tanto? ancor del sangue del tuo padre
 Lorde e fumanti, dal tuo volto, Oreste,
 Le avresti ognora, e con ragion, respinte.
 Oh di madre men barbara tu degno!... —
 Ma, per avverti io ‘l genitor svenato,
 Ti son io madre meno? ah! mai non perde
 Natura i dritti suoi...

(III, 4, vv. 109-116)

Like Giocasta, Clitennestra displays, here as elsewhere in the tragedy, a tendency toward self-debasement in which the crimes of the mother are repeatedly evoked and the sense of her culpability is reinforced. In fact, her soliloquy commences with the degraded image of the mother set in contrast to that of the innocent son: “Figlio infelice mio!... figlio innocente / Di scellerata madre!” (III, 4, vv. 96-97). Nevertheless, although she refers to herself as a mother who is “barbara” and thus unworthy of her son, she refuses to disavow her own maternity. The entire soliloquy plays host to the figure of the guilty mother; the word “madre” appears six times within

⁹⁴ “Errai fors’io; ma, spento il figlio, / Secura omai col tuo consorte...” (III, 3, vv. 67-68).

its thirty verses. But while the soliloquy redounds to Clitennestra's own maternity, she herself comes to renounce it at its close:

Deh! vivi, Oreste; vieni; in Argo torna,
L'oracol compi; in me, non una madre,
Ma iniqua donna che usurpò tal nome,
Tu svenerai: deh! vieni... Ah! più non sei...

(III, 4, vv. 122-125)

Contemporaneous to her full embrace of her maternity is her own rejection of it on the basis of her iniquity. It is an impossible repudiation on her part, as the ensuing tragic action depends on her identity as mother. Yet this anguished dismissal of her own maternity reveals both Clitennestra's identity in flux and her refusal to be contained within defined roles, either from nature or society derived. As previously seen, it is to this paradoxical fluidity of identity that Alfieri attributes his difficulty in portraying the queen, who alone among the characters in *Oreste* transgresses typological boundaries by occupying the liminal space between villainy and heroism.

While Clitennestra, it has been argued, appears more passive than Giocasta, she is nevertheless propelled following Oreste's fictitious death to oppose Egisto on the basis of a mourning turned wrathful.⁹⁵ Integral to her characterization as mother within the tragedy, this furor enables her to mount some resistance to her passion for the tyrant and exercise an uneasy autonomy within the tragic action. When Egisto questions the veracity of the report concerning Oreste's death, she responds with what Nicole Loraux has identified as maternal grief suffused with rage⁹⁶:

⁹⁵ Raffaello Ramat interprets Clitennestra as a woman who passively meets death: "Il suo desiderio di morte è un sospiro non una decisione, un'ansia di volontà non una volontà; o anche un desiderio di sfuggire alla pena quotidiana che la consuma e alla soggezione ipnotica in cui Egisto la tiene" (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 64).

⁹⁶ See Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, particularly the chapter "Black Wrath," 43-56. Nicole Loraux begins her close analysis of Clytemnestra by offering commentary on the general state of mothers in classical tragedy: "More cruel yet than the fate of divine mothers in tragedy is that of mortal women: whether triumphant or heartbroken queens, they are always wounded in their motherhood. From that moment when

Se al mio pianto nol credi, al *furor* mio
 Tu il crederai. Già nel materno core,
 Tutto, sì tutto, il non mai spento affetto
 Mi si ridesta.

(III, 5, vv. 138-141, the emphasis is mine)

Her uncharacteristic rage is remarked upon by the tyrant himself, who wonders: “Donna, or qual novella / Ira è la tua? Cotanto ami l’estinto / Figlio, cui vivo rammentarvi appena?” (III, 5, vv. 154-156). Through Egisto, Alfieri exposes the inconsistencies of Clitennestra’s maternity and the obstacle it locates in her lingering affections for her consort. However, Clitennestra explains her seemingly disproportionate reaction to Oreste’s death on the basis of the ineradicable maternity preexisting her relationship with Egisto, and to which she made mention in her earlier soliloquy.

Believing her son killed, she is free to voice her thoughts openly before the tyrant:

Che parli tu? mai non cessava io, mai,
 Di esser madre d’Oreste: e se talvolta
 L’amor di madre io tacqui, amor materno
 Mi vi sforzava. Io ti dicea, che il figlio
 Men caro era al mio cor, sol perch’ei meno
 Alle ascose tue insidie esposto fosse.
 Or ch’egli è spento, or più non fingo; e sappi,
 Che m’era e ognor caro sarammi Oreste
 Più assai di te...

(III, 5, vv. 157-165)

Emboldened by her wrathful mourning, she now refuses to conceal her contempt for Egisto’s tyranny, declaring that any appearance of waning maternal sentiment on her part owed itself to an instinctive desire to protect Oreste from her consort’s “insidie.” She declares, furthermore, that her son will continue to be dearer to her than Egisto himself. While this declaration stands in stark

mothers obtain only the horrified sight of the child’s corpse to compensate for their loss, mourning that has already been transformed into wrath becomes vengeance in deeds. And mothers kill” (Loraux, 49). Although introducing a discussion of the Clytemnestra of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Loraux’s assessment of a mournful wrath turned murderous is applicable to Clitennestra’s violently anguished reaction to news of Oreste’s death in Alfieri.

contrast with the firm allegiance to Egisto she will display at the conclusion of the tragic action, Alfieri here posits Clitennestra's maternity, not her passion for her consort, as the impetus for her assumption of a more active role within the tragedy. It is through a maternity wounded by the death of her son and Egisto's aspersions that she attempts to undermine the passion compelling her to link herself indissociably with the tyrant. After yet another disparaging comment from Egisto,⁹⁷ she warns: "Se amor mi spinse a rio delitto, pensa / A che può spinger disperata donna / Spregiato amor, duolo, rimorso, e sdegno" (III, 5, vv. 246-248). Having already established at the beginning of the tragedy the queen's unhappy conjugal union with the tyrant ("spregiato amor"), Alfieri associates her unusually vigorous threat with the grief ("duolo") felt for the loss of Oreste and the attendant sensations of guilt ("rimorso") and disdain ("sdegno") for her consort. Put differently, it is not merely Clitennestra's status as a despised wife which causes her to threaten an act of violence, but, so too, her status as a bereaved mother inspirited, much as Giocasta, by the wrath accompanying maternal loss.

The heroine's transformation into a wrathfully mournful mother subsequently engenders a shift in the earlier metaphor of the maternal body as "scudo." Where before she offered up her metaphorized body to shield her consort from Oreste's sword, she likewise presents her body in defense, this time, of her son. After Elettra's inadvertent admission that one of the two messengers from Focida, about to be sent to their deaths, is, in fact, Oreste, Clitennestra says: "Qual m'è figlio di voi? ditelo: scudo / A lui son io" (IV, 4, vv. 194-195). Engaging the tension between maternal and filial bodies he earlier established in *Polinice*, Alfieri posits this self-sacrificial gesture as a failure, unable to be reconciled with Oreste's own inclination for violence and revenge. Clitennestra's maternity stained by mariticide and adultery is refused as a sacrificial offering. Now

⁹⁷ "Io t'amo, quanto / Tu il meriti" (III, 5, vv. 242-243).

recognized by his mother, Oreste rejects the peccable woman and, in so doing, unwittingly foreshadows her demise at his own hands:

Va; tue man sanguinose altrove porta.
 Ciascun di noi, se morir dessi, è Oreste:
 Nessun ti è figlio, se abbracciar tal madre
 Da noi si debbe.

(IV, 4, vv. 209-212)

With Oreste's following appeal to his mother to prove her maternal love by slaying Egisto,⁹⁸ Alfieri further confirms the failure of Clitennestra's intervention within the tragic action. Although upon recognition of Oreste she reaffirmed her willingness to die either in his defense or by his hand,⁹⁹ her resolve begins to waver once Egisto's safety is compromised.¹⁰⁰ Alfieri thus instantiates his association of maternal mourning with rage by showing Clitennestra's confusion and inclination toward inaction once the grounds for that mourning, i.e. Oreste's death, have been removed. Nevertheless, characterized by psychic division, the heroine finds herself torn between action and passivity, subjected to the antinomic logics of motherhood and carnal passion which Alfieri confirms as tragically irreconcilable.

The tragedy emphasizes the contradictions besetting the queen through the chiasmic arrangement of its main male figures in Act IV, scene 4. Oreste and Egisto each attempt to sway

⁹⁸ "Di materno amore / Niun'altra prova io da te voglio" (IV, 4, vv. 245-246).

⁹⁹ "Già, finch'io vivo, forza
 Non è che mai dal fianco tuo mi svelga.
 O in tua difesa, o per tua mano io voglio
 Morire."

(IV, 4, vv. 235-238)

¹⁰⁰ At his mother's visible hesitation, Oreste exclaims in anguish: "Ami tu Egisto? l'ami; E sei madre d'Oreste?" (IV, 4, vv. 249-250).

Clitennestra to their cause; the latter warns her of the consequences of her reckless furor,¹⁰¹ while the former denounces his mother's vacillations and weakness of spirit.¹⁰² Unlike Giocasta, whose failed interventions within the tragic action resulted from external opposition and not from any personal hesitancy, Clitennestra is, instead, a figure whose dual identity in the tragedy as an iniquitous consort and a remorseful, and later wrathful, mother leaves her deprived of the same internal consistency. For Alfieri, the tragedy of Clitennestra in *Oreste* is that of a woman to whom is put the choice between maternity and passion and for whom, given her psychological complexity, any decision is not without its tragic consequences.¹⁰³ Unable to oppose the tyrant, notwithstanding her affection for her son, Clitennestra makes her choice: Egisto. This decision, however, is founded on her full understanding of her submission to an unconquerable love against which any action appears futile. She therefore says: "Sol ch'io potessi / Trarmi dall'empie mani; oh figlio!..." (IV, 4, vv. 298-299).

The final act of the tragedy depicts the consequences of Clitennestra's choice; it also portrays the unravelling of the queen's mental state as she seeks in vain to save Egisto while finding herself unable to repudiate a maternity soon to prove fatal. Furthermore, the concluding act is founded on a series of reversals and oppositions. For example, Alfieri contrasts Clitennestra's earlier furor with that of the titular hero. Desperate to thwart Oreste's quest for revenge, she avows to Egisto:

A lui sottrarti,

¹⁰¹ "Pilade, Elettra, Oreste, a morte tutti: / E tu pur, donna, ove il furor non tempri" (IV, 4, vv. 279-280).

¹⁰² "Tu, donna, / Già sì ardita al delitto, or debil tanto / All'ammenda sei tu?" (IV, 4, vv. 296-298).

¹⁰³ See Squarotti, "Lo spettacolo del Tiranno: le tragedie dell'Alfieri," in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, 122-129. Giorgio Barberi Squarotti describes Clitennestra's passion as a "malattia" whose effects are best explored within the private dimensions of the family (Squarotti, 124). It can be therefore argued that in its confrontation with the maternal side of her character, Clitennestra's passion becomes its most tragic.

Perir dovessi, io giuro. Ah! qui rimani;
 In sicuro ti cela; al *furor suo*
 Argin son io frattanto.

(V, 1, vv. 7-10, the emphasis is mine)

Additionally, having sided with the tyrant against her son, Clitennestra attempts to definitively reject the maternity that serves as an impediment to her union with Egisto. She thus reassures her consort that she will remain with him despite Oreste's rage and the clamor of the people calling for the tyrant's demise:

Tu sì, svenami, Egisto,
 Se a me non credi. 'Oreste'. Odi tu? 'Oreste'.
 Qual d'ogni intorno quel terribil nome
 Alto risuona? ah! più non sono io madre,
 Se tu in periglio stai: contro il mio sangue
 Già ridivengo io cruda.

(V, 2, vv. 17-22)

Despite Clitennestra's adjuration to Egisto and her insistence on a maternity turned pitiless and cruel, the entire final act pivots on the tension between the ineffectuality of the maternal body within the tragic action and the concurrent impossibility of its being repudiated. Therefore, returning once more to the metaphor of the maternal body as shield, Alfieri has Egisto resist the queen's efforts to save him: "Mal ti fai scudo a me; lasciarmi: vanne: / A niun patto al mio fianco te non voglio" (V, 2, vv. 29-30).

Rejected by her consort, Clitennestra remarks on her solitude and on her tragic duality as both wife and mother in a re-evocation of Elettra's already cited appraisal of her in Act II, scene 2 as "or madre, or moglie; e non mai moglie, o madre" (v. 312):

Mi scaccian tutti!... Oh doloroso stato!
 Me non conosce più per madre il figlio;
 Nè per moglie il marito: e moglie, e madre
 Io son pur anco.

(V, 3, vv. 31-34)

As elsewhere in the tragedy and in the preceding *Agamennone*, the heroine contrasts moments of confusion with clear and unequivocal commentary on her otherwise paradoxical position within the tragic action. Additionally, similarly to Giocasta, she comes to abhor her maternal status, seen as an integral element of her personhood and yet not fully under her control, as it has ultimately left her powerless to govern her children and thwart their designs against her. Speaking to Elettra, she therefore refers to what her passion for Egisto has cost her:

Sì, lo vo' salvo, io stessa.
Sgombrami il passo; il mio terribil fato
Seguir m'è forza. Ei mi è consorte; ei troppo
Mi costa: perder nol vogl'io, nè posso.
Voi traditori a me non figli abborro:
A lui n'andrò: lasciami, iniqua; ad ogni
Costo v'andrò: deh! pur ch'io giunga in tempo!

(V, 4, vv. 62-68)

From here the tragedy swiftly reaches its conclusion, yet Clitennestra remains an ambivalent figure until the very end. In her final confrontation with Oreste, who is determined to slay Egisto, she attempts to move her son to pity by reminding him that she is still his mother: “Figlio, pietà” (V, 8, v. 112). Oreste, who is likewise throughout the tragedy engaged in an ultimately fruitless struggle to renounce Clitennestra’s maternity, emphasizes his relationship to his genitor Agamennone in a rejection of his mother: “Pietà?... Di chi son figlio? / Io son d’Atride figlio” (V, 8, vv. 112-113). He subsequently resists Clitennestra’s efforts to restrain him physically: “Chi, chi mi afferra il braccio? / Chi mi trattiene? oh rabbia!” (V, 8, vv. 117-118). His enraged “chi,” repeated three times, suggests that for the hero, Clitennestra is an ultimately unrecognizable and unfathomable figure. As for the queen, her penultimate line in the tragedy refers to her confused and repudiated maternity; she beseeches her son: “Oreste, / Non conosci la

madre?” (V, 8, vv. 119-120). Blinded by his hatred of Egisto and motivated by an implacable fury, Oreste kills his mother, offstage, mistaking her for the odious tyrant himself. It is another departure on the part of Alfieri from classical tradition where the hero knowingly and deliberately kills his mother in the versions of the myth composed by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The ambivalence of Clitennestra’s maternity, at once rejected and confirmed throughout the tragic action, is further reflected in Elettra’s subsequent line: “Ella è pur sempre / Madre: pietade aver sen dee” (V, 11, vv. 124-125). The young woman’s evocative “pur sempre” is both an affirmation of Clitennestra’s irrefutable status as mother and a tragic acknowledgement of its many inconsistencies and failures.

In the opening scene of Act IV, Oreste comments on a horror imbued with the opposing sentiments of wrath and pity that Clitennestra’s visage will inspire in him beyond his ability to conceal:

Meglio assai l’odio, che a nemico io porto,
 Nasconderò, che non quell’orror misto
 D’ira e pietade, onde me tutto empie
 Di tal madre la vista.

(IV, 1, vv. 15-18)

...

in mente

Da pria mi entrava di svenarla; e tosto
 Mi assalia nuova brama, d’abbracciarla:
 Quindi entrambi a vicenda. – Oh vista! oh stato
 Terribil, quanto inesplicabil!...

(vv. 19-24)

Compelled by an irrepressible need to confront his mother, Oreste is torn over whether to slay her or to embrace her. Like Giocasta, Clitennestra is an agent of horror, a mother repellent and yet

impossible to repudiate fully.¹⁰⁴ Her peccable maternity and her own conflicted feelings toward her maternal status render her the most psychologically complex character within *Oreste*. Throughout the tragic action, she is repeatedly made to choose between her lover and her son and endure all the attendant psychic turmoil. Her efforts to reconcile her passion for Egisto with her maternal affection for Oreste prove a failure and lead the other characters to believe her crazed. At one point, after Oreste threatens her with violence, her consort says contemptuously of her maternal affections: “Ecco qual premio merta / L’amor tuo insano” (IV, 4, vv. 213-214). Later, Elettra informs Oreste that she had Pilade look after their mother in an effort to keep her from Egisto: “A lui la disperata madre insana / Dianzi affidai” (V, 12, vv. 159-160). Although it does not preclude moments of lucid and penetrating thought, Clitennestra’s apparent insanity is the result of her unstable presence within the tragedy as a woman acting in defiance of typological categorizations.¹⁰⁵ She is both a mother and yet not a mother, an object simultaneously of pity and horror. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes with regard to Clitennestra in a line already cited: “E credo, che lo spettatore la possa giudicare quasi abbastanza punita dalla orridezza del presente suo stato.”¹⁰⁶ Like Giocasta, Clitennestra addresses her own failings as a mother throughout the tragic action. But although she is also openly reviled by the tragedy’s other

¹⁰⁴ Kristeva writes of the son’s fear of identification with the mother, a threat prevented through religious rituals intended to define the mother as abject and assure man’s separation from her defilement (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 64). Laura Nay nevertheless suggests Oreste’s unpreventable identification with Clitennestra when he inherits her incurable guilt following her murder: “Ma come l’uccisione di Agamennone non aveva reso libera Clitennestra di amare Egisto, anzi l’aveva precipitata nell’abisso dei rimorsi, altrettanto nel momento in cui Oreste svena la madre scambiandola per Egisto, ne eredita l’insanabile rimorso” (Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 178).

¹⁰⁵ Nay argues that only Oreste displays a true madness within the tragedy: “Oreste impazzisce, solo questo gli concede Alfieri, e in tal modo si sottrae, almeno in parte, alla tortura dei rimorsi che Clitennestra ha privato su di sé, vittima anch’egli, come sentenza Pilade nella battuta conclusiva, della ‘inevitabil legge’ dell’‘orrendo fato’” (Nay, 178).

¹⁰⁶ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101.

characters and a victim of Egisto's mistreatment, her sins are such that not even death at her son's hands is punishment enough for a transgressive maternity. Alfieri merely believes her to be "quasi abbastanza punita," signifying that Clitennestra as a mother is less forgivable than Giocasta due to her refusal to submit wholly to any maternal dictates. Yet her sacrifice on behalf of the tyrant fails as a rejection of maternity; Clitennestra is inescapably a mother. *Oreste* therefore concludes with another ambivalent depiction of tragic motherhood, and although the tragedy closes with Oreste rendered mad by the act of matricide and declines to show Clitennestra's death,¹⁰⁷ it is the horrifying specter of the mother that haunts its end. Distancing himself from Aeschylean tradition, which he has followed—loosely, and possibly through earlier French treatments of the *Oresteia*—up till now in both this tragedy and the prior *Agamennone*,¹⁰⁸ Alfieri does not exonerate Oreste with a third tragedy.¹⁰⁹ Instead, in yet another confirmation of the ambivalence with which the

¹⁰⁷ Alfieri does not often hide the bodies of slain women in his tragedies, going so far as to depict Giocasta committing suicide in the closing scene of *Polinice*. However, it can be argued that his representation of dead mothers has its limits when the mother is in fact slain by her son. Clitennestra's dead body is therefore not seen in *Oreste*, although Clytemnestra's corpse is made visible in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. On the visibility and invisibility of the dead female body in classical tragedy, see Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Loraux argues that in the *Oresteia* the hero's contemptuous and ironic final command to Clytemnestra "to go and sleep in death with the man she loved and preferred to her own husband" serves to further justify his slaying of the queen, who is guilty of the murders of both Agamemnon and the king's captive mistress, Cassandra (Loraux, 25). Alfieri's decision not to show Clitennestra's slain body shrouds her murder, undertaken by her son in a blind fury, in telling ambiguity.

¹⁰⁸ For the eighteenth-century French tragedies that served as possible antecedents to Alfieri's own version of the Oresteian myth, see Mineo, "Oreste," 507-508. Nicolò Mineo contends that although the work was initially inspired by a reading of Seneca, the spirit of Alfieri's *Oreste* is ultimately Aeschylean (Mineo, 499-500, 507). In the *Vita*, Alfieri reveals that this Senecan inspiration did not successfully translate to Senecan tragedy in either *Agamennone* or *Oreste*: "Appena ebbi stesa l'*Antigone* in prosa, che la lettura di Seneca m'infiammò e sforzo d'ideare ad un parto le due gemelle tragedie, l'*Agamennone* e l'*Oreste*. Non mi pareva con tutto ciò, ch'ella mi siano riuscite in nulla un furto fatto da Seneca," (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 206).

¹⁰⁹ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri articulates a close connection between vendetta and sublimity: "È vero altresì, che quando ella [vendetta] è giusta, quando l'offesa ricevuta è atrocissima, quando le persone e circostanze son tali, che nessuna umana legge può risarcire l'offeso, e punir l'offensore, la vendetta allora, sotto i nomi di guerra, d'invasione, di congiura, di duello, o altri simili, a nobilitarsi perviene, e ad ingannare le menti nostre, a segno di farsi non solo sopportare, ma di acquistarsi meraviglia e sublimità" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 99). Oreste's exoneration in Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* would likely have appeared to the tragedian a solution incompatible with his conception of a tragedy founded on "forte sentire," or that

tragedian endows the maternal presence throughout the tragic action, the hero is driven senseless with remorse over the slaying of his mother. It is the result of a transgression of the maternal body that not even Clitennestra's ultimately unpardonable sins render permissible.

which establishes strong, intuitive feeling as the basis of tragedy rather than any learned tragic art. Were Oreste to have been exonerated, his vendetta would have seemed less sublime.

II.3. Merope and the Maternal Ideal

His only tragedy whose title derives from a tragic mother, *Merope* is Alfieri's most coherently articulated vision of maternity. The tragedian both conceived and versified the tragedy in 1782. From the very outset, *Merope* operates under the aegis of a maternal figure; Alfieri, in fact, dedicated the tragedy to his own "amatissima" mother, Monica Maillard de Tournon, the memory of whose anguish at the premature death of his older half-brother serves to animate the work's depiction of its heroine and her motherly devotion.¹¹⁰ Declaring in the dedication that *Merope* has "per base l'amor materno," Alfieri next recalls the terrible scene of his mother's grief over the loss of her young son:

Ancora ho presente agli occhi l'atteggiamento del vero profondo dolore, che in ogni di lei moto traspariva con tanta immensità: e benchè io in tenerissima età fossi allora, sempre ho nel core quelle sue parole che eran poche e semplici, ma vere e terribili: 'Chi mi ha tolto il mio figlio? Ah! io l'amava troppo: Non lo vedrò mai più!' e tali altre, di cui, per quando ho saputo, ho sparso la mia Merope (dedication to *Merope*).

Merope might thus also appear to be Alfieri's most personal representation of tragic maternity, with the heroine's intense maternal affections mirroring those of Monica Tournon herself. The tragedy therefore invites close autobiographical readings that have not been ignored by scholars, who have, however, noted discrepancies between the idealized maternity of *Merope* and Alfieri's own more ambivalent feelings towards his mother as expressed in the *Vita* and other

¹¹⁰ In a letter addressed to Monica Tournon and dated 11 March 1785, Alfieri refers his mother to a volume of his tragedies in which *Merope*, dedicated to her, can be found: "Credo che a quest'ora ella avrà ricevuto da Torino, per mezzo del mio amico Abate di Caluso, il terzo Tomo delle mie Tragedie in cui è la *Merope* dedicata a lei; ella la può tutta leggere, o farsela leggere quanto un libro di devozione, non contenendo essa nessuno profano amore, ed essendo tutta consecrata all'amor materno," in *Epistolario* I, ed. Lanfranco Caretti (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1963), 242. Alfieri's reference to "profano amore" is a recall to his predecessor Scipione Maffei's innovative decision to remove from his own *Merope* the traditional romantic love subplot common to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century takes on the myth.

writings.¹¹¹ This ambivalence on the part of Alfieri toward the maternal figure, discoverable in *Polinice* and *Oreste*, tragedies with perhaps less overt autobiographical associations, is also reflected in the genesis of *Merope* itself. As Simona Costa states, the tragedy is “esplicitamente, opera di gara ed emulazione,” the result, in part, of Alfieri’s indignant reaction to a second reading of Scipione Maffei’s celebrated version, first staged in 1713.¹¹² *Merope* is therefore the tragedy through which Alfieri intended to surpass the earlier lauded efforts of Maffei, presented as the touchstone of Italian tragedy, and also contend with the version of the eponymous tragedy offered by Voltaire in 1743 as a corrective to Maffei’s own work.¹¹³ As a result, the ambivalent depiction

¹¹¹ Paola Trivero calls into question the sincerity of Alfieri’s dedication of *Merope* to Monica Tournon, noting that the tragedian himself admitted to having been motivated by a fervent desire to compete with Maffei’s lauded version, first staged in 1713. See “La madre,” in *Tragiche donne*, 24-25. Simona Costa, like Trivero, recalls Alfieri’s ambivalent relationship with his mother, as recorded in the *Vita*. On Alfieri and Monica Tournon’s difficult and contradictory relationship, see Trivero, 7-49; and Costa, “Merope,” in *Alfieri tragico*, 564-582.

¹¹² Costa, 564. In the *Vita*, Alfieri records his heated thoughts following a rereading of Maffei’s *Merope*: “In quel frattempo, verso il febbraio dell’82, tornatami un giorno fra le mani la *Merope* del Maffei per pur vedere s’io c’imparava qualche cosa quanto allo stile, leggendone qua e là degli squarci mi sentii destare improvvisamente un certo bollore d’indegnazione e di collera nel vedere la nostra Italia in tanta miseria e cecità teatrale che facessero credere o parere quella come l’ottima e sola delle tragedie, non che delle fatte fin allora (che questo lo assento anch’io), ma di quante se ne potrebbero far poi in Italia” (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 227).

¹¹³ On Alfieri’s confrontation with his predecessors in composing *Merope*, see Trivero, “La madre,” in *Tragiche donne*, 7-49; and Costa, “Merope,” in *Alfieri tragico*, 564-582. See also Walter Binni, “Il periodo romano dell’Alfieri e la *Merope*,” in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 299-319. Binni colorfully and aptly describes Alfieri’s *Merope* as “un alfierizzamento dello schema offerto dal Maffei e sviluppata seguendo le linee e le situazioni fondamentali di quello, ma rafforzandole, drammatizzandole più energicamente, raddensandole in alcuni punti decisivi, coerentemente alla tecnica drammatica alfieriana, con un maggiore rilievo dell’azione (più azioni che narrazione), con l’abolizione dei personaggi intermediari (i confidenti di cui il Maffei si serviva per far narrare fatti non portati sulla scena e per atteggiare la sua tragedia nelle sue caratteristiche forme di dialogo e di conversazione), con la concentrazione dell’interesse sui soli personaggi necessari allo svolgimento dell’azione (quattro personaggi contro i sette del Maffei), con una caratterizzazione più incisiva dei personaggi, con un più intenso intreccio delle battute delle scene, con un linguaggio più vibrato e appassionato” (Binni, 313). Yet, despite Alfieri’s characteristic invigoration of Maffei’s tragic themes, Binni contends that *Merope* lacks “il motivo poetico più vero e centrale dell’Alfieri,” that is, the full richness of delusion and suffering more readily apparent in other tragedies, including *Saul* (Binni, 316).

of the tragic mother in *Merope* is further compounded by Alfieri's own anxieties as tragedian which led him to state with dissatisfaction in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that "il genere di passione molle materna (prima base di questa tragedia), non è interamente il genere dell'autore."¹¹⁴ Alfieri's difficulty in redressing the traditional figure of Merope so as to make her conform to the dictates of his own personal tragic vision can be seen in the distance which notably separates the queen from other Alfierian tragic mothers. While Giocasta and Clitennestra are characterized by a maternity contaminated and often abhorred, Merope finds her motherhood stained neither by an adverse fate, as in the case of the former woman, nor by an immoral passion, as in the case of the latter. Indeed, Alfieri's description of Merope in the *Parere sulle tragedie* redounds to the purity of her status as mother: "Merope mi pare esser madre dal primo all'ultimo verso; e madre sempre; e nulla mai altro, che madre: ma, madre regina in tragedia, non mamma donnicciuola."¹¹⁵ Unlike Giocasta, to whom Alfieri refers as a "vera madre" for her impartiality toward her warring and ill-fated sons, Merope is a mother whose maternal devotion concentrates on a single child within the tragic action, the long absent Egisto. And unlike Clitennestra, whose motherhood must compete with her unremitting desire for the tyrant, also her consort, Merope rejects any amorous sentiment external to her identity as mother; throughout the tragedy, she repeatedly rejects Polifonte's offer of marriage, refusing any union, political or otherwise, with the murderer of her husband and offspring, and usurper of the throne of Messene.¹¹⁶ By all appearances, Merope possesses a

¹¹⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 120.

¹¹⁵ Alfieri, 119.

¹¹⁶ Alfieri's removal of the traditional amorous subplot between Polifonte and Merope follows Maffei. While Voltaire heavily criticized Maffei for what he viewed as the tragedy's defects in his "Lettre de M. de la Lindelle à M. de Voltaire," he, too, made Polyphonte offer marriage to the heroine on political, rather than romantic, grounds in his version of the story, first published in 1744. For Voltaire's criticism of Maffei, see "Lettre de M. de la Lindelle à M. de Voltaire" and "Réponse à M. de la Lindelle," in vol. 3, *Théâtre*, vol. 4, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier Frères, Libraires Éditeurs, 1877),

maternity distilled almost to the point of immaculateness and reveals little trace of the defects of character found in Giocasta and Clitennestra. Yet it is in her propensity for violence, typical of Alfierian mothers and the result of an intense maternal mourning turned wrathful, that Merope closes the gap separating her from the previous two tragic mothers. Additionally, like them, she further emerges as a complex mother due to her ambivalent relationship to the tragedy's male characters, most notably her son, Egisto, and his foster father, Polidoro. In *Merope*, his most explicit and idealized tragic depiction of motherhood, Alfieri attempts but is ultimately unable to resolve the contradictions defining his previous representations of maternity in *Polinice* and *Oreste*.

Merope opens with the heroine's anxious reflection on her own motherhood: "Merope, a che pur vivi? Omai più forse / Tu non sei madre" (I, 1, vv. 1-2). In a faint recall to Giocasta, who commences *Polinice* with a despairing appraisal of her corrupted maternity and its consequences, Alfieri defines Merope as mother from the very start of the tragedy and links that maternal identity to death: having spirited away her son in an effort to preserve him from Polifonte's brutality, which led to the death of her husband and other two children fifteen years earlier, Merope wonders what reason she might have for living should she no longer be able to identify as a mother. For Alfieri, it is the living presence of the son which generally constitutes the mother's main reason for living; thus the mother—Giocasta, Merope, and Clitennestra, notwithstanding this last figure's deviation from the general rule into what essentially amounts to its subversion—hovers between life and death within the dimensions of Alfierian tragedy and is increasingly pulled toward the latter over

492-497. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in turn, roundly criticized the French thinker for his hypocrisy. See Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 156-160.

the course of the tragic action.¹¹⁷ Merope, in fact, confirms this symbiotic linking of the mother and son wherein the mother's life depends on the existence of her male offspring: "Sola speranza mia; sola cagione / Del mio vivere..." (I, 1, vv. 10-11). Lamenting that it has been a year since her son abandoned the company of his caretaker to whom she had originally entrusted him as a child,¹¹⁸ the heroine fears his death; yet, in the absence of any concrete knowledge, she exists in a state of suspension between life and death, juxtaposing fraught anticipatory mourning and irrepressible hope for her son's return. Unlike with either Giocasta or Clitennestra, Alfieri with Merope mitigates the looming presence of death which serves as a constant threat to the maternal figure; where the previous two tragic mothers openly allude to their own deaths or offer their bodies as a sacrifice repeatedly over the course of the tragic action, any thanatotic impulses on the part of Merope are initially held in check by her hope for her son's continued existence.

Alfieri's categorical affirmation of Merope in the *Parere sulle tragedie* as "madre sempre; e nulla mai altro, che madre" finds itself further substantiated by Polifonte's commentary on the heroine. While the tyrant suspects that Merope's son, and heir, has not perished but is still alive, he remarks on the heroine's sorrow which is suffused with an unmistakable vehemence:

O donna,
 Dunque nè tempo, nè ragion, nè modi,
 Nè preghi miei, nulla bastar può dunque,
 A raddolcir l'ira tua acerba? Il fero
 Tuo duol, ch'io tender quasi a fin vedea,
 Dimmi, perchè da ben un anno or forza
 Vie più racquista; e te di te nemica
 Cotanto fa?

(I, 2, vv. 30-37, the emphasis is mine)

¹¹⁷ Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 34. "In Alfieri's tragic world of familial destruction, an individual deprived prematurely of her family has no reason to live" (Fiore, 34).

¹¹⁸ "Ecco or ben l'anno, che il segreto asilo / Ch'ei certo aveva a Polidoro appresso, / Abbandonò" (I, 1, vv. 14-16).

By having Polifonte astutely observe that the edge of Merope's dolor has sharpened over the course of the year,¹¹⁹ Alfieri associates the heroine's mourning with the wrath earlier observed in Giocasta and Clitennestra. This connection anticipates the dramatic climax of the action in Act IV when Merope will launch herself in murderous, maternal anguish at her son's presumed killer. Through Polifonte and his observations on Merope, Alfieri makes it clear that the heroine's tragic maternity is motivated by strong feeling, by intense motherly devotion to which considerations unrelated to motherhood will be viewed as extraneous, foreign, and even abhorrent.

As such, when Polifonte proposes a political marriage to Merope, she violently rejects the offer, which is secretly intended to shore up his position in Messene but ostensibly meant to provide the heroine with a respite from her mourning. Finding the proposal repugnant to her very nature as a mother, Merope exclaims:

Oh nuovo, inaspettato, orrido oltraggio!
L'insanguinata destra ad orba madre
Ardisci offerir, tu vil, che orbata l'hai?
Del tuo signore al talamo lo sguardo
Innalzar tu, che lo svenasti?

(I, 2, vv. 91-95)¹²⁰

While both Giocasta's and Clitennestra's maternity is presented as already corrupted from the very beginning of their respective tragedies, Merope's maternity is depicted as without stain from the very onset of the tragic action, hence her indignant reaction to Polifonte's offer in the first act. The

¹¹⁹ Mario Fubini contends that given his astuteness, Polifonte distinguishes himself from other Alfierian tyrants, who display more openly the anxiety derived from shouldering the burdens of their ill-gotten power: "Qualcosa di non alfieriano o di poco alfieriano è rimasto nella tragedia: ce lo dicono appunto Polifonte, il 're machiavelliero', che fra i tiranni alfieriani è quello che meglio sa nascondere l'ansia del dominio e perciò anche quello la cui personalità è meno fortemente rilevata" (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 247). Alfieri assigned to Polifonte the epithet "Re Machiavelliero" (v. 105) in the *Satira VIII*. See Alfieri, *Scritti politici e morali*, ed. Clemente Mazzota, vol. 3 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1984), 126.

¹²⁰ For a general analysis of these lines, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 253-254.

tyrant's proposal of marriage is an outrage to a motherhood that has yet to be contaminated. For Alfieri, the exquisiteness of Merope's maternity, its rarefied nature, and the pure intensity of its effusions all depend on the heroine's willing exclusion from the tragedy's political dimensions into which she would be drawn through marriage with the scheming Polifonte. Simona Costa has noted that while *Merope* foregrounds the maternal presence and transforms its concerns into the general motor of the tragic action, the tragedy juxtaposes this central focus on tragic motherhood to an auxiliary interest in the politics of tyranny as represented by the character of Polifonte.¹²¹ Alfieri therefore extracts from the relationship between Merope and Polifonte the germs of the dichotomy between feminine sentiment and male reason that he will deepen over the course of the heroine's later interactions with Egisto and Polidoro. Fully enclosed within her identity as mother, and refusing to participate in a world separate from the domestic sphere now denied her, Merope declares that while Polifonte is "tutto tiranno" (I, 2, v. 117) and sees nothing "altro che regno" (I, 2, v. 118), her concerns take her in the opposite direction: "I figli, / E il mio consorte oltre ogni trono amai;... / E abborro te...." (I, 2, vv. 118-120). The tragedy thus proposes two conflicting spheres—the political one in which Polifonte resides and the private one for which Merope mourns—two spheres which for the heroine do not overlap.¹²² If both Giocasta and Clitennestra enter into the political dimensions of their respective tragedies, works whose principal conflicts are otherwise domestic in scope, Merope never transgresses the boundary line separating her maternal concerns from the tyrant's political ambitions. While Giocasta's impartiality toward Polinice and Eteocle leads her to sue for an unrealistic peace between them, and Clitennestra's

¹²¹ On Alfieri's deviation from Maffei in his treatment of Polifonte, see Costa, "Merope," in *Alfieri tragico*, 572-574.

¹²² For a penetrating examination of the original emphasis Alfieri places on the political aspect of *Merope*, see Laura Sannia Nowé, "Il 'Tiranno' e la 'Madre' nella *Merope* alfieriana," in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, 205-223.

passion for Egisto serves to impede Oreste's vendetta as heir to a murdered father and usurped king, Merope remains a mother uncorrupted by the political considerations of the tragic action. Furthermore, while both Giocasta and Clitennestra couple maternity and hatred, professing at various moments their antipathy toward a motherhood rendered odious to them, Merope directs her animosity only at the tyrant himself.

Polifonte notes the heroine's utter lack of political ambition and avows that her maternity, her only reason for living, will eventually reveal the truth of her son's whereabouts:

— Accorta invan; sei madre: e verrà giorno
 Che tradirai tu del tuo cor l'arcano,
 Tu stessa. — Ah sì! quel suo figliuol respira.
 Ch'altro in vita la tiene?

(I, 2, vv. 169-172)

The first act of *Merope* thus concludes with another confirmation of the absolute nature of Merope's identity as mother and its dependence on the living presence of the son. Polifonte uses the heroine's continued existence as proof that her son has not perished as she has maintained and posits her maternal sensibility as the force which will betray her. Polifonte's comment reinforces Merope's exclusion from the political dimensions of the tragedy; as the tragic action progresses, Alfieri will further insist that maternal sentiment is antithetical to matters of state and achieves its greatest tragic clarity in Merope's willing and sustained refusal to participate in such matters for any reason unconnected to motherhood.¹²³

In Act II, Alfieri provides an increasingly penetrating examination of Merope's maternal sensibilities when the heroine receives word of the death of a young man at the hands of another

¹²³ Apt to the discussion is Lisa Hopkin's assessment of the heroine in English Renaissance tragedy: "For women, physical and mental operations are never far apart, and are indeed conceived of as intrinsically linked," in *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13. As a mother, and Alfieri's maternal ideal, Merope is neither emotionally nor physically compatible with politics.

young man near to the age of her absent son. Already held in suspension between life and death as a result of the uncertainty regarding her son's current status, Merope displays a conspicuous indecisiveness in her treatment of the surviving youth, Egisto, who is brought before Polifonte after his capture following the homicide. The heroine is simultaneously buoyed by the hope that the young man might be her son and burdened with the fear that this same man might be her son's killer. In the tension that builds during her interrogation of the youth, Alfieri demonstrates how positioned at the cusp of both joyance and despondency, Merope is subjected to antinomic forces representing both the zenith and nadir of maternity in its purest form.

Addressing Egisto, she observes: "Alto cor tu racchiudi in basso stato: / Quasi il tuo dir fa forza... Eppure,... se a luce / L'ucciso, o il nome almeno...." (II, 3, vv. 171-173). Merope's distinctly maternal sensibility is demonstrated by her ability to recognize in the young man a noble bearing that his otherwise humble dress belies. However, her suggestion of an affinity, here just barely articulated but soon to be strengthened, between herself and the young man appears concurrently to an insuppressible doubt encapsulated in her "eppur." While both *Giocasta* and *Clitennestra* reflect on their contaminated maternity throughout the tragic action, lucidly remarking on its perversion and assuming the guilt for the course of events or personal actions that have perverted it, Merope largely operates, instead, on pure maternal instinct. Although *Polinice*, *Oreste*, and *Merope* all concern the return of an absent son, *Merope* distinguishes itself from the other two tragedies by its depiction of a tragic mother unburdened by guilt and thus less introspective than either *Giocasta* or *Clitennestra*. Instead, as the titular heroine of the tragedy, Merope is not sidelined by the tragic objectives of her heroic son, but, rather, finds herself at the very center of the tragic action. Thus hers is less a contemplative, peripheral maternity than a maternity that is generative, never threatened with repudiation, but constantly exercised and

embraced. It is this motherhood, centripetal and operative, on which the entire first four acts of the tragedy depend.

This same motherhood is played up in Merope's fraught, individual encounter with Egisto in the second act. When the young man argues his case before her, he appeals to her maternal instincts:

E men di lui saresti a me pietosa?
 Mia giovinezza per non ti parla?
 Puro non vedi in sul mio volto il cuore?
 Non entri a parte del mortale affanni,
 In cui miei genitori?... oimè!... Non fosti
 Madre anco tu? deh! della mia....

(II, 4, vv. 187-192)

Alfieri finds the entire exchange between Merope and Egisto on the deeply intimate rapport possible only between a mother and her son; the tragic tension thus arises from the conflict emerging between the pure, instinctual, and mutual affection that each feels for the other and the cognitive limitations that prevent Merope from fully recognizing her son. Her reply to Egisto reveals the commingling of hope and doubt within her, with the two antithetical sentiments each seemingly reinforced by the presence of the other:

Pur troppo
 Io 'l fui, ... pur troppo!... ed or, chi sa?... — Respira
 Dunque ancor la tua madre?... E il padre tuo
 D'Elide è pure?

(II, 4, vv. 192-195)

Merope's lament that she might no longer be a mother due to the death of her remaining son is immediately followed by the hope that she might still be a mother if the young man before her should prove to be the absent Cresfonte. Buoyed by her maternal desire to settle the matter once and for all, she presses the young man for information regarding his parents, asking if his mother

is still alive and if his father comes, like his son, from Elide. Her disappointment is palpable when Egisto finally reveals that he was not born in Messene, like his father (whose name is given as Cefiso and not Polidoro, the name of the loyal servant to whom Merope had entrusted him, as she had hoped). But this disappointment is still suffused with the irrepressible hope characteristic of Merope and unique to her as an Alfierian tragic mother¹²⁴:

Oh ciel!... Che parli?... —
 Giovine egli è, di quella etade appunto....
 E quel contegno,... e quei sembianti.... Ei pare,
 Eppur non è.

(II, 4, vv. 224-227)

However, her hopeful and yet hesitant “Ei pare, / Eppur non è” is quickly superseded by doubt and an accompanying despair as a result of Egisto’s candid responses, which encourage her to turn her attention next to the young man who was slain.¹²⁵ For Alfieri, Merope is both tantalized by the apparition of her long-lost son in the form of Egisto and haunted by the specter of his corpse in her visualization of Egisto’s victim. Her maternal predicament is further complicated when Egisto, after having described his assailant as young, haughty, and poorly clad, concludes his account of the homicide by seemingly confirming the victim’s identity as Merope’s son through proofs intelligible only to a mother:

...Sovviemmi... or.... sì;... che avrebbe
 Ogni ferocia impietosito; in voce

¹²⁴ While Giocasta occasionally demonstrates hope in her quest to frustrate her sons’ bloodlust through the sacrifice of her mortal body, it is Merope who exhibits a hope untouched by the fatal despair that ultimately undoes the former mother’s vain longing. Furthermore, Giocasta’s hope for an end to the antagonism between her sons effects minimal change in the tragic action, whereas Merope’s hope, alternating with her maternal suspicion and dread, heightens the tragic tension, which culminates in her attempted murder and subsequent recognition of Egisto in Act IV, scene 3. On the techniques Alfieri employs in order to increase the tragic tension arising from Merope’s oscillation between hope and disappointment in her encounter with Egisto, see Nowé, “Il ‘Tiranno’ e la ‘Madre’ nella *Merope* alfieriana,” in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, 207-208.

¹²⁵ “Ma, dianzi ancor dicevi, / Che l’ucciso era d’Elide” (II, 4, vv. 227-228).

Di pianto, singhiozzando, ei domandava
La madre sua.

(II, 4, vv. 236-239)

Merope's anguished response recalls Clitennestra's own furious despair after receiving the false report of Oreste's death in a distant land: "La madre? E tu fellone, / Perfido, e tu pur l'uccidevi? e il corpo / Ne scagliavi nell'onda? Oimè!... Perduto...." (II, 4, vv. 239-241). However, Alfieri concerns himself with heightening Merope's internal divisions, torn as she is between hope and doubt, optimistic longing and an equally instinctual wrathful melancholy. Therefore, the tragedian takes care to maintain Egisto as a figure capable of appealing to the opposing aspects of Merope's motherhood.

Startled by Merope's desperate ferocity, the young man exclaims:

Oh ciel! come potea
Offender io te, Merope, cui sempre
Nel mio cor venerai? — Sapea dal padre
Le tue dure vicende: al pianger suo
Piansi più volte anch'io: la brama ardente
Di pur vederti anco pungeami.

(II, 4, vv. 245-250)

Egisto's narration of his tears shed over Merope's misfortunes prompts the heroine to admit, despite herself: "Ma, qual parlar! qual piangere!... Che fia? / Mal mio grado ei mi tragge a pianger seco" (II, 4, vv. 262-263). Like Giocasta and Clitennestra, Merope is a lachrymose mother whose weeping coincides with irruptions of maternal wrath. But while Giocasta weeps in an attempt to turn her bellicose sons from bloodshed, and Clitennestra weeps in guilt for past crimes in a display of keenly felt abjection, Merope's tears speak to the purity of her maternity, violated by crimes

committed beyond her control, yet not tainted. Her weeping, furthermore, underscores her indecisiveness and the still unresolved tension between her maternal hope and doubt.¹²⁶

Merope soon admits to Egisto the emotional impasse at which she finds herself. She can neither condemn him nor absolve him; she can only weep: “Ahi lassa! / Che mai farò? — Nè condannar ti posso, / Giovinetto, nè assolverti” (II, 4, vv. 277-279). The second act therefore closes with the image of Merope as a tragic mother whose antithetical expressions of dolor and rage, optimism and apprehension, are entirely in keeping with Alfieri’s depiction of an idealized maternity animated by instinct and sentiments now purified so that they no longer signify personal culpability, as in the case of Giocasta and Clitennestra. Merope withdraws from Egisto in order to weep without restraint,¹²⁷ but not before revealing that her interrogation of the young man will soon resume.¹²⁸ She leaves, unable to hear more but still compelled to arrive at the truth. Egisto comments on this conflicted maternity, which pounces like a tiger but also talks sweetly, observes tenderly, and weeps like a mother:

Or più che tigre,
Mi si avventa adirata: or, più che madre,
Dolce mi parla; e tenera e pietosa
Mi guarda, e piange.

(II, 5, vv. 305-308)

¹²⁶ “— Più non reggo al suo dire. Inchino appena
L’alma a pietà, che un dubbio orribil tosto
A furor mi sospinge: appena io lascio
Tacer pietade, ecco, s’io ‘l miro, o l’odo,
A lagrimar son risospinta.”

(II, 4, vv. 271-275)

¹²⁷ “Alle mie stanze è forza / Ch’io mi ritragga a sfogar lungamente / Il rattenuto pianto” (II, 4, vv. 296-298).

¹²⁸ “Di nuovo / Udrotti or ora; e il tutto ridirai” (II, 4, vv. 299-300).

These contradictions of Merope's motherhood are further reflected in Egisto's subsequent observation that the intensity of her sympathy for the dead young man transcends any ordinary compassion, but, instead, corresponds to a more intimate and personalized tenderness and sorrow: "Ov'ella affetto / Orba madre non fosse, e da gran tempo, / Parria che a lei svenato avessi un figlio" (II, 5, vv. 310-312).

In Act III, Merope pursues the truth regarding Egisto's identity and that of the young man his victim. Her instinctual maternal impulses substantiate the dichotomy between female sentiment and male reason that Alfieri earlier established in her encounter with Polifonte in Act I and then in her impassioned exchange with Egisto himself in Act II. The reappearance of Polidoro, the faithful servant to whom she had entrusted the infant Cresfonte and who arrives in Messene bearing news of her son, leads the heroine to suspect that her worst fears will soon be realized. Although she recoils in horror before Polidoro can even share his information, the irrepressible urge to know compels her to hear his account; however, she questions her reason for living if her aged servant should reveal that Cresfonte has perished: "Che più rimango in vita, / Se madre omai non sono?" (III, 2, vv. 132-133).

Even more than the tragic mothers previously analyzed, Merope accepts death as a constitutive element of her own maternity. If both Giocasta and Clitennestra treat death as the most logical choice in the wake of a maternity either defiled or repudiated, Merope views death as the natural consequence of a motherhood deprived of the being which validates it: her son. Therefore, while Merope is perhaps the Alfierian tragic mother who most fully embodies her maternal role, she negotiates its dictates with less autonomy than either Giocasta or Clitennestra, her life hinging, independently of her, on the survival or death of Cresfonte. She is therefore a more reactive and intuitive tragic mother.

When Polidoro asks if she remembers the girdle he holds before her,¹²⁹ she takes the bloodied article for a token of her son's demise¹³⁰: "Oh vista! / Di fresco sangue egli è stillante?... Oh cielo! / È di Cresfonte il cinto.... Intendo.... Io.... manco...." (III, 2, vv. 135-137). Merope's maternal understanding will ultimately reveal itself a failure of inductive reasoning, since the belt, while indeed belonging to Cresfonte, has merely been shed by the young man out of fear of recrimination following his act of self-defense. Nonetheless, because Merope is a "madre regina in tragedia,"¹³¹ her conclusion, although inaccurate, underscores the pure, instinctual nature of her maternity, which is undisturbed by any logic that runs counter to her motherly intuitions. Consequently, she declares that with the death of her remaining son, her own death is now guaranteed: "Io sono / Madre.... Ah no! più nol son.... Morire...." (III, 2, vv. 150-151). For Alfieri, there can be no tragedy for a mother already bereft of her son at the onset of the tragic action; the tragedy, instead, arises from the potential for the loss of the son, as in the case of Giocasta, or in the immediate aftermath of that loss itself. For both Clitennestra and Merope, women otherwise separated due to the stark differences underlying their tragic maternity, their tragedy as mothers emerges from their reactions to the recent loss of their sons, a loss nonetheless contradicted by the reappearance or unmasking of these same sons over the course of the tragic action.¹³² In Alfierian

¹²⁹ "...Donna,... conosci.... questo.... cinto? (III, 2, v. 135).

¹³⁰ Maffei has Merope believe her son dead on the basis of a ring, while Voltaire opted for a suit of armor, a choice which for Lessing far surpassed the bounds of believability (Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 133).

¹³¹ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 119.

¹³² The tragedies of other Alfierian mothers also pivot on the relationship between mother and son. In *Don Garzia* (first versified in 1779 and then for a second time in 1781), Eleonora perishes in defense of Garzia, her preferred son. With Diego, his father's favorite, slain by Garzia, Eleonora is unable to extricate herself from the pattern of familial favoritism that has torn apart her family. Cosimo and Eleonora's remaining son, Piero, is, however, almost forgotten in the tragedy's final, bloody proceedings. In *Timoleone* (first versified in 1781, then given a second versification the following year), Demarista's cries of despair at the antagonism between her sons echo Giocasta's own in *Polinice*. After Timoleone slays his brother, the tyrant Timofane, Demarista is unable to draw comfort from the fact that her other son still lives. Unlike Giocasta,

tragedy, which routinely privileges domestic themes and is driven by intimate, familial antagonisms,¹³³ the tragic mother is inseparable from the tragic hero, her son, and thus vitally linked to him. Merope's reaffirmation of death at the conclusion of her meeting with Polidoro therefore comes as no surprise¹³⁴; in the absence of the son, the tragic mother is, and must be, moribund.

Merope reacts to her son's alleged death not simply with an avowal of her own death soon to come but, additionally, with a vehemence that borders on sadism.¹³⁵ In her despair, she accuses Polifonte of conspiring to have Cresfonte murdered, the proof being his lenient treatment of his killer, Egisto. Indignant, the tyrant reminds the heroine of her own compassionate encounter with the young man.¹³⁶ But Merope, undeterred, demands that Egisto, still in the tyrant's custody, be given a painful and protracted death over no more fitting a place than the tomb of her son:

Or fa, ch'io il vegga
Vittima tosto cader sulla tomba

however, she does not end her life but in her confused grief evokes the dilemma of the typical Alfierian tragic mother, who is inextricably linked to her male offspring: "Misera!... Oh ciel!... che fo? Perduto ho un figlio... / E l'altro a me non resta..." (V, 3, vv. 221-222). Finally, in *Agide* (1786), Aegistrata finds no reason to live after Agide's suicide and, desiring to imitate Spartan example, follows her son by immediately taking her own life.

¹³³ See Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite*, particularly pages 37-75.

¹³⁴ "Morire; altro non resta..." (III, 2, v. 172).

¹³⁵ Laura Sannia Nowé states that "l'Alfieri persiste invece, a somiglianza del Maffei, nell'attribuire un tratto di spietata ferocia alla madre assetata di vendetta" (Nowé, "Il 'Tiranno' e la 'Madre' nella *Merope* alfieriana," in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, 211). Voltaire's Merope exhibits a more tempered, less instinctively violent mourning.

¹³⁶ "Tu stessa
Dell'uccisor pietade non mostrasti?
Nol lasciasti forse io teco? a piacer tuo
Non l'hai tu stessa interrogato? Donna
Del suo destin non ti fec'io?"

(III, 3, vv. 272-276)

Dell'inulto Cresfonte; ivi l'infida
 Alma spirar fra mille strazj e mille
 Fa ch'io 'l vegga: ed allora....

(III, 3, vv. 280-284)

With the death of Cresfonte, all that keeps the heroine from ending her own life is her pursuit of revenge, as she admits: “Può sol vendetta alcuno istante ancora / Me rattenere in vita” (III, 3, vv. 279-280). The brutality with which she seeks to have her son's killer executed is the result of an intense maternal mourning that has devolved into wrath.¹³⁷ But while Giocasta and Clitennestra, who also exhibit a similar wrath, largely channel the violence of their grief inwards in atonement for a corrupted maternity, Merope directs it entirely at her son's assassin, since the outrage her motherhood has suffered stems not from any iniquity on her part but from an external act of cruelty. Both the intensity of her rage and the savagery of the death she looks to have inflicted on Egisto are not incongruous with her maternity but, rather, instantiate Alfieri's idealized depiction of tragic maternal devotion. In fact, not content to witness Egisto's death as a mere bystander, Merope, in vindication of her rights as a bereaved mother, seeks to personally execute the young man herself:

Io voglio a prova, io stessa,
 Ferirlo; immerger mille volte io voglio
 Entro quel cor lo stile.... Atroce core,
 Che udia il mio figlio, in voce moribonda
 Di pianto e di pietà, chiamar la madre....
 L'udiva; eppur nell'onde lo scagliavi,
 Forse ancor semivivo; ancora forse
 Tal da potersi trarre dalle orrende
 Fauci di lunga morte....

(III, 3, vv. 296-304)

¹³⁷ “Aspra la voglio, e pronta, / E inaudita, e terribile” (III, 3, vv. 290-291), she says in reference to Egisto's death.

Her lust for vengeance is motivated by more than the purported death of Cresfonte; her personal participation in Egisto's death is a reaction to a perceived second insult to her maternity that strengthens the furor of her mourning, i.e. the young man's cold indifference to his victim piteously calling out for his mother. Transported by a grief that conjures up for her beguilingly plausible visions of Cresfonte's final moments, Merope is even led to imagine that Egisto threw her son "semivivo" into the river in an effort to hide all traces of the murder, thus sealing his otherwise preventable death. In the following scene, Polidoro disparages her for these animated, extravagant expressions of an ireful sorrow: "Dal dolor, dall'ira / Sei travagliata, e in piè ti reggi appena" (III, 4, vv. 327-328). Alfieri nonetheless justifies Merope's maternal bloodlust, considering it evidence of her singular dedication to her son. Before learning of his true parentage, Egisto himself will respond to news of his impending execution by insisting that his death is justifiable because it will assuage Merope's maternal grief: "Ah! vieni, o madre sconsolata; in questo / Perfido cor l'ira tua giusta appaga" (IV, 2, vv. 89-90).

Merope's wrathful despair culminates in Act IV. Here Alfieri refines his representation of maternity to the point of sublimity, but this representation appears alongside his most violent depiction of motherhood, as the heroine stands unwittingly poised to kill her own son. It was this gesture, completely antithetical to a mother, which, unsurprisingly, constituted the principal interest in the tragedy on the part of the tragedians who tried their hand at writing their own versions.¹³⁸ Maffei, in fact, had his Merope attempt to kill Egisto not once, but twice. For his part, Alfieri anticipates the violence of the act in the string of invectives he has his Merope launch at the chained Egisto:

Ahi scellerato, barbaro, fellone!

¹³⁸ For other tragic treatments of the story of Merope prior to Alfieri's own version, see Trivero, "La madre," in *Tragiche donne*, 7-49.

Assassin vile, la tua mano impura
 Bagnata hai tu del mio figliuol nel sangue?
 Che mi val tutto il tuo? sola una stilla
 Scontar mi può di quello? — Io, che già tanto
 Era infelice! e tu, sovra ogni donna,
 Sovra ogni madre, misera mi festi. —
 Stringete voi que' ferrei lacci; orrendi
 Strazj inauditi apprestategli: ei spiri
 Infra tormenti l'alma. Io vo' mirarlo
 Piangere a calde lagrime: non ch'una,
 Mille vo' dargli io stessa orride morti. —

(IV, 3, vv. 146-157)

Neither Giocasta nor Clitennestra, in their grief as mothers and in despair over their impure maternity, displays a furor as savagely visceral as Merope's.¹³⁹ Believing herself deprived of her offspring, and forced to confront her remaining son's murderer, Merope declares herself unparalleled in her unhappiness and misery. Within Alfieri's pantheon of tragic mothers, she is rendered singular by the force of her bereavement; alone of the mothers with which Alfierian

¹³⁹ Lessing writes of his exasperation with both Maffei's and Voltaire's decision to have Merope rather carefully plan her execution of Egisto despite the force of her grief. According to the German critic, such calculation undermines the authenticity of her despair and calls into question her inability to take as much care when investigating her son's alleged death: "Now Maffei and Voltaire only make me tremble for Ægisthus, for I am so out of patience with their Merope that I should almost like to see her execute her deed. Would that that she might have this satisfaction! If she can take time to execute her revenge she ought also to have found time for investigation. Why is she such a bloodthirsty animal?" (Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 145). Laura Sannia Nowé argues that Alfieri must have encountered the French translation of Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, first appearing in 1785, while in the midst of revising *Merope* that same year (Nowé, "Il 'Tiranno' e la 'Madre' nella *Merope* alfieriana," in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, 210). One possible proof might be found in Alfieri's transformation of Merope's violent mourning into a more instinctual grieving rage. While Maffei has his Merope charge at Egisto on two separate occasions, weakening with the second attempted execution the emotional and theatrical impact of the first, Alfieri follows Voltaire in having Merope attempt to slay the young man just once. However, Alfieri eschews the French thinker's more phlegmatic portrayal of the queen, depicting Merope as so overcome with rage as to ignore Egisto's cry of "Ahi madre!" (IV, 3, v. 219). Such a blindly infuriated grief permits Alfieri to maintain Merope as a maternal ideal, in the words of Lessing, "in the condition of violent action in which she gains in strength and expression what she has lost in beauty and tenderness" (Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 145). On Alfieri's relationship to Lessing, see Nowé, "Il 'Tiranno' e la 'Madre' nella *Merope* alfieriana," in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione*, particularly pages 210-217.

tragedy is replete, she embodies most fully the horror that is a common attribute among them. Yet the horror to which her maternity gives rise is sanctioned by the unflagging devotion she exhibits in her quest to avenge her slain child. As a mother whose dedication to her son is realized in the extremity of the violence she is willing to undertake on his behalf, Merope engages a paradoxical maternity; in her inability to recognize her son, she nearly transforms herself into his executioner in what Alfieri recognized as an incomparable gesture with which the remaining tragic action could not compete.¹⁴⁰ But notwithstanding her turn toward violence, Alfieri has Merope question the intensity of her own furor: “Ahi lassa! e ciò ti renderà il tuo figlio?” (IV, 3, v. 158). For Mario Fubini, her tendency to hesitate amid her passion for revenge reveals her to be “in fondo una debole creatura.”¹⁴¹

But the heroine moves to slay Egisto despite this momentary hesitation. Her efforts to kill her son’s assassin are interrupted by the desperate Polidoro, witness to the proceedings and unable to reveal the truth of Egisto’s identity in the presence of Polifonte. When Polidoro suggests that Egisto’s victim might not be her son,¹⁴² Merope accuses her former servant of conspiring against her on behalf of the tyrant and in mockery of the slain Cresfonte.¹⁴³ When Polifonte points out her

¹⁴⁰ Alfieri, “Note dell’Alfieri, che servono di risposta,” in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 269. “Stimo impossibile in natura, di sostituire al momento, in cui una madre sta per uccidere il proprio figlio e lei sconosciuto, un altro punto di eguale, non che di maggiore interesse. Tutto è minore quello che può accader dopo; e sia quel che si voglia” (Alfieri, 269).

¹⁴¹ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 255. With regard to Merope’s habit of interrupting her bloodlust with softer maternal reflections, Mario Fubini writes: “Perché Merope non è una Rosmunda, un’Elettra, un’Antigone, creature viventi in un’ossessione o in un sogno di sangue o di eroismo: nonostante la sua trillustre solitudine e il suo destino tragico, nonostante l’orgoglio regale non spento, ella è legata, come quelle eroine non sono, al mondo nostro della più semplice umanità ed è quasi sollevata a forza sopra sé medesima dall’ultima sua sventura” (Fubini, 255).

¹⁴² “E quell’ucciso... forse / Non era il figlio tuo...” (IV, 3, vv. 203-204).

¹⁴³ “Qual nuova ascolto / Iniqua fraude!... Ahi rio tiranno! or tutti / Dunque hai corrotti? (IV, 3, vv. 204-206).

excessive grief, which obscures for her the truth that is clear to everyone else present,¹⁴⁴ he signifies her isolation from the other characters due to the limits of her tragic intellection. Rendered delirious by a grief that has turned murderous, Merope fails to perceive what Polidoro, Egisto, and now Polifonte clearly understand: the young man before her is indeed her son. Alfieri heightens the tension of the scene by having Merope persist in her attempt to slay Egisto. Despite the fact that the tyrant reproaches her for her maternal delusions, she insists that she be given a blade with which to execute Egisto herself: “A me quel ferro; io stessa,... / Io sì, svenarlo or di mia mano...” (IV, 3, vv. 217-218). Not even the young man’s exclamation of “Ahi madre!” (IV, 3, v. 219) is enough to divert her bloodlust; as a mother rendered exemplary by her devotion to her son, and in whom maternal sentiment and intuition are privileged over reason, Merope fails to identify Egisto now that she believes him to be her son’s murderer.¹⁴⁵ The violent excesses of her maternal sensibility are thus contained only once Polidoro, in whom Alfieri reposes the tragedy’s dichotomous insistence on paternal reason, explicitly reveals that Egisto is in fact the errant Cresfonte: “Ah! ferma.... È il tuo figlio” (IV, 3, v. 227).

With Egisto correctly recognized as her son, Merope’s own identity as mother, threatened by the preceding tragic action, is now no longer in doubt. Polidoro’s subsequent command to her to save her child¹⁴⁶ signals the return in Alfieri of the metaphorized maternal body, as Merope will insert herself between Egisto and the tyrant’s soldiers as his shield: “Io ti son scudo, o figlio....

¹⁴⁴ “O donna, / Tu pel dolor vaneggi. Or, chi non vede?...” (IV, 3, vv. 209-210).

¹⁴⁵ At this point, Egisto has already been apprised of his royal origins by Polidoro in a departure on the part of Alfieri from both Maffei and Voltaire, who have the young man learn of his identity only after the queen’s attempt at revenge is thwarted by her own recognition of her son. For Mario Fubini, this represents Alfieri’s failure to render Egisto a convincing character within the tragedy. See Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 256.

¹⁴⁶ “Sei madre; salvalo” (IV, 3, vv. 228).

Ah! il cor mel dice; / Son madre ancor....” (IV, 3, vv. 230-231). While Giocasta and Clitennestra both present their bodies as shields, it is only Merope who will prove successful in her defense of her son, since this defense coincides with her complete embrace of motherhood, whose dictates she accepts without resistance. As corrupted mothers, both Giocasta and Clitennestra, on the other hand, couple genuine affection for their offspring with abhorrence for the consequences of maternity.

In *Polinice* and *Oreste*, the tragic mother has already been debased through her participation in an ill-fated or immoral conjugal union at the onset of her respective tragedy, and thus attempts to intervene in the tragic action through the sacrifice of her mortal body. As a paragon of tragic maternity, Merope, instead, agrees to sacrifice herself on behalf of her son by accepting Polifonte’s offer of marriage in what for Alfieri becomes a propitiatory gesture even greater than the tragic mother’s suicide itself. Eschewing the love subplot found in previous versions of the tragedy,¹⁴⁷ Alfieri creates a Merope who is chaste and singularly dedicated to her son’s interests; her chastity and integrity as a mother are even strengthened in the very moment in which they come under threat by the possibility of marriage to the tyrant. In order to do this, Alfieri stresses the political grounds for the union between Merope and Polifonte so that the heroine’s image as an exemplary, self-sacrificing mother is not contravened by any amorous sentiment which might detract from the tragedy’s focus on her fidelity to her son. Additionally, her own unequivocal aversion to a political marriage reinforces her willing exclusion from the public sphere and prepares for her conspicuous withdrawal from the tragic action, given that the tragedy concludes

¹⁴⁷ For two analyses of Alfieri’s diversion from tradition in his retelling of the myth of Merope, see Trivero, “La madre,” in *Tragiche donne*, 7-49; and Costa, “Merope,” in *Alfieri tragico*, 564-582.

by departing from the domestic sphere in which her maternal concerns predominate and eventually achieve resolution, albeit an uneasy one.

But as Merope admits to her newly reclaimed son, marriage to Polifonte, though odious, is bearable if in exchange for her submission to his political designs, the tyrant spares her child's life.¹⁴⁸ In response, Egisto laments the form her sacrifice must take but declares it as proof of both her virtuousness and the indivisible nature of her maternity through which she agrees to marriage unmotivated by anything other than the promise of her son's safety: "Or sì t'è d'uopo, or, se il fu mai, mostrarti / Madre, e non altro. Di te stessa orrendo / Sacrificio tu fai; ma il fai pel figlio..." (IV, 5, vv. 319-321).

Alfieri however concludes Act IV by undermining Merope's sacrifice: both Egisto and Polidoro will lure Polifonte into a false sense of security and make him believe the marriage will proceed as planned while they concoct a plan to thwart his political ambitions. If Merope agrees to enter into matrimony with the tyrant on the basis of an irrepressible maternal instinct and the desire to protect her son at all costs, it is Polidoro who works to save both her and Egisto through the exercise of reason. Alfieri furthers this earlier established dichotomy between maternal sensibility and paternal intellect in the foster father's admonition to Merope. Advising the tragic mother to put her trust in him by allowing him to communicate to the tyrant her consent to the latter's offer of marriage, Polidoro asserts: "Io finger meglio / Saprò di te" (IV, 5, vv. 349-350). With Alfieri having apotheosized in Act IV Merope's maternity through her quest for vengeance, her subsequent recognition of her son, and her decision to sacrifice herself on his behalf through a union with the tyrant, the tragedy concludes with the heroine's protracted withdrawal from the tragic action. This replacement of Merope with Polidoro in Act V is anticipated in the old man's

¹⁴⁸ "Ma quali / Duri patti a me il rendono?... Che dico? / Dolce ogni patto, che il figliuol mi rende" (IV, 5, vv. 306-308).

final words to Egisto in Act IV. His counsel to his foster son to conceal his hatred for Polifonte demonstrates the tragedy's submission of sensibility to reason that will be finalized in the closing act:

Intanto
 Tu il valor troppo, e tu il grave odio ascondi.
 Tutto per te l'amor di madre io sento;
 Ma inoltre n'ho di padre il senno, e lunga
 Esperienza: in me si creda.

(IV, 5, vv. 354-358)

Capable of being both mother and father to Egisto through his ability to conjoin "l'amor di madre" and paternal "senno," Polidoro is positioned, unlike Merope, who is completely and definitively a mother, to engineer Polifonte's demise. Alfieri, however, admitted the ungainliness of the transition from Act IV to Act V in which Merope recedes into the background out of the perceived necessity to conclude the tragedy with the death of the tyrant. In the "Note dell'Alfieri, che servono di risposta," published in 1785 as a reaction to Melchiorre Cesarotti's commentary on and criticism of *Merope* included in his "Lettera dell'abate Cesarotti su *Ottavia, Timoleone e Merope*" of that same year, the tragedian agrees with Cesarotti that the tragedy declines after Merope's recognition of her son but still remains in want of a suitable ending:

Stimo impossibile in natura, di sostituire al momento, in cui una madre sta per uccidere il proprio figlio e lei sconosciuto, un altro punto di eguale, non che di maggiore interesse. Tutto è minore quello che può accader dopo; e sia quel che si voglia. O si uccida il tiranno, o dal tiranno si uccida quel figlio istesso, non sarà mai più una madre che sta per uccidere il proprio figlio, noto a chi vede, e non alla madre. Ciò posto, questa tragedia che non finisce, né può finire, colla sola agnizione d'Egisto, va pur terminata; e lo dev'essere colla morte del tiranno.¹⁴⁹

If both *Polinice* and *Oreste*, two tragedies whose titles derive from the tragic son, otherwise foreground the maternal figure either by ending with her death or by lingering on it by way of a

¹⁴⁹ Alfieri, "Note dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 269-270.

conclusion, *Merope*, titled after the tragic mother herself, undergoes a reverse operation, i.e. her definitive substitution by the tragic hero in the final scene of the tragedy. However, Merope's slow withdrawal from the tragic action in Act V is not without its faint stirrings of maternal pathos, which evoke the sentiments expressed in preceding acts. As such, despite entrusting both her safety and the safety of her son to Polidoro, the heroine approaches the impending nuptials with Polifonte with unmistakable trepidation:

O di Cresfonte inulta ombra dolente,
 Perdona, deh! l'involontario oltraggio:
 Per te fui madre; e pel tuo figlio io vengo
 Alle nozze di morte. A fero passo
 Mi traggi, o figlio.... Ma, se in vita resti,
 Assai son paga....

(V, 3, vv. 115-120)

With her lamentation, in which she addresses in typical Alfierian fashion her slain husband as well as her surviving son,¹⁵⁰ Merope emphasizes her status as mother (and not, interestingly, her status as wife), soon to be undermined by her union with the tyrant, the "involontario oltraggio."¹⁵¹ For Alfieri, as has already been argued, tragic maternity is, in large part, an androcentric affair; in other words, it lives and dies with the tragic son, and much of the tension and ambivalence located in the tragedian's portrayal of tragic mothers derive from the women's acknowledgment, often bitter and anguished, of this dependence on their male offspring. If both Giocasta and Clitennestra offer

¹⁵⁰ Both Giocasta and Clitennestra address their slain husbands in their respective tragedies.

¹⁵¹ In the "Note dell'Alfieri," Alfieri responds to Melchiorre Cesarotti's criticism that Merope's visible reluctance to see the marriage with Polifonte through to completion weakens the tyrant's justification for a public wedding, as Polidoro, speaking on behalf of the queen, insisted that she was prepared to marry Polifonte. Alfieri writes that notwithstanding her repugnance towards a conjugal union with Polifonte, Merope is still given to hope that she might sway the people present to her side: "Polidoro avea detto al tiranno, Merope esser presta alle nozze; e in fatti Merope lo era: ma alla vista di quel popolo, la cui presenza poc' anzi ha frenato, e impedito il tiranno di farle uccidere il figlio; si risveglia in lei la speranza di poterlo commovere parlandogli" (Alfieri, 272). Here is additional proof of Merope's irrepressible hope which renders her unique among Alfierian tragic mothers.

up through their corrupted motherhood some resistance to this inflexible linking of the tragic mother and son, it is Merope as Alfieri's maternal ideal who wholly concedes to it.¹⁵² Although she refers to her impending marriage to Polifonte as the "nozze di morte," she will be "paga" since her sacrifice will guarantee her son's life.

In Act V, Alfieri succeeds in bringing about a resolution to the tragic action through the death of the tyrant. Present at the nuptials between Merope and Polifonte, Egisto manages to seize the ceremonial axe from the priest's outraised hand and slay the tyrant over the altar where the customary matrimonial sacrifice was to be performed. In order to rally the people to their cause, Merope swiftly and publicly claims Egisto as her son and heir, Cresfonte: "Il mio figlio / Egli è, vel giuro; è il vostro re..." (V, 3, vv. 162-163). With the people as yet unconvinced, she appeals to them again, insisting on her condition as a mother to legitimize the young man:

Messenj; egli è il mio figlio;
Cresfonte egli è: nol ravvisate al volto,
Alla voce, agli sguardo, alle inaudite
Alte sue prove, ed al mio immenso amore?...

(V, 3, vv. 176-179)

Already, however, Alfieri has set in motion Merope's departure from the tragedy. Having guaranteed Egisto's safety, the heroine no longer has any bearing on the remaining tragic action. As a result, it is not her adjuration to the people to accept her "immenso amore" for Egisto as proof of his parentage which ultimately wins their loyalty; instead, it is Egisto, whose words call to mind

¹⁵² Paola Trivero suggests that in her perfection as a mother, Merope exists in the shadow of Giocasta and Clitennestra, two more psychologically complex, and thus more memorable, Alfierian maternal figures: "Madre—dunque—per eccellenza Merope, anzi la 'madre' della tradizione tragica; ma altre potrebbero essere le madri che ci vengono incontro dalla memoria del teatro: madre soggetto a destini ben più inquietanti di quello della regina di Messene. Destini come quelli di Giocasta o di Clitennestra" (Trivero, "La madre," in *Tragiche donne*, 47).

the virtues of the previous king, who convinces the crowd that he is indeed Cresfonte's, and not only Merope's, son:

Messenj, a terra spento
 (Vedetel voi?) qui Polifonte giace:
 Io 'l trucidai; del padre, dei fratelli,
 Della madre, di me, di voi vendetta
 Compiuta a un tempo ebbi sol io: se reo
 Perciò vi sembro, a voi soli mi arrendo. —
 Ecco; la scure che bastommi a tanto,
 A terra io scaglia: eccomi inerme appieno,
 E in man di voi: se ingiustamente il sangue
 Io versai di costoro, il mio si versi.

(V, 3, vv. 186-195)

The people's response seals the tragedy's removal from the aegis of the mother to that of the father: "Oh generoso! Oh bello! È in tutto il padre" (V, 3, v. 196). Witness to the restoration of her son's fortunes, Merope calls for her son to embrace her: "Vieni al mio seno, o figlio.... / Ma oimè!... mi sento.... dalla troppa.... gioja.... / Mancare..." (V, 3, vv. 206-208). Overcome by emotion, she however swoons before she can rejoice with her son leaning on her maternal breast.

Egisto is led to exclaim:

Oh madre!... Ella or vien meno quasi,
 Per gli eccessivi affetti. Andiam; si tragga
 A più tranquilla stanza. — In breve io riedo,
 Messenj, a darvi di me conto intero. —
 Tu, mio buon padre, sieguimi: deh! m'abbi
 Per figlio ognor, più che per re; ten prego.

(V, 3, vv. 208-213)

Undone by her "eccessivi affetti," which confirm her exclusion from the sphere of paternal reason into which the sphere of maternal sensibility in which she wholly resides cannot be integrated, Merope disappears from public view, and from the tragedy itself. Brought inside to recover within the intimate confines of the palace, she cedes her place to Egisto and Polidoro, who

both signify the tragedy's closing emphasis on political considerations and on the related paternal bond that supersedes the natural bond linking mother to son in a more domestic setting. In fact, Egisto requests that Polidoro consider him more than a king and, rather, his "figlio," suggesting that for Alfieri, where the politics of tragedy are concerned, the biological relationship between mother and son must be viewed as ancillary to the ties of affection joining a foster father to his foster son.¹⁵³ Therefore, although Merope represents Alfieri's maternal ideal, expressing a purity which differentiates her motherhood from the perversions to which that of Giocasta and Clitennestra is subjected, she is no less an ambivalent mother than the other two women. If the tragic mother is closely associated with sacrifice and death in Alfierian tragedy, despite the non-fatal ending the tragedian assigns to Merope, the heroine is the only tragic mother who it might be said successfully sacrifices herself on behalf of the tragic hero. Where Giocasta's attempt to sacrifice herself in atonement for a maternity defiled by fate is thwarted, and Clitennestra comes to sacrifice herself in defense of the tyrant as opposed to her son, Merope, on the other hand, succeeds in saving the tragic hero, whose reentry into the politics of Messene necessitates the withdrawal of the maternal body itself from further tragic consideration. The heroine thus recedes into the background having fulfilled her duty, while the other two tragic mothers, for whom Alfieri is unable to provide any similar, seemingly definitive resolution, haunt the close of their respective tragedies. Yet, for all this, evidence of Alfieri's continued difficulty in approaching the figure of the tragic mother can be found in his lackluster appraisal of his treatment of Merope in the *Parere*

¹⁵³ Simona Costa writes that "Merope esce dunque di scena di fronte a una condivisione del potere esclusivamente virile" (Costa, "Merope," in *Alfieri tragico*, 582). Laura Nay concurs with Costa's assessment, noting that the tragedy closes with a "celebrazione" of paternal love: "A questo punto, ormai arrivati al lieto fine, la madre-regina può uscir di scena facendo sì che una tragedia al femminile si chiuda, lo ha sottolineato Simona Costa, tutta al maschile o meglio, per guardare alla nostra linea di lettura, come una tragedia dedicata all'amore materno, si chiuda con la celebrazione di quello paterno" (Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 189).

sulle tragedie. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the “genere di passione molle materna (prima base di questa tragedia),” considering it unsuited to his talents and thus not “interamente il genere dell’autore.”¹⁵⁴ After *Merope*, in fact, the tragic mother quietly withdraws from Alfierian tragedy (what about Aegistrata?).¹⁵⁵ If Cecri appears in *Mirra*, it is largely because her presence heightens the isolation and iniquitous desires of the heroine; furthermore, the tragedy’s focus on *Mirra*, who subverts traditional familial bonds, precludes any interest in the anxieties and anguish of her mother, as Alfieri’s interest in tragic mothers lies predominately in their relationship with their sons.¹⁵⁶ It is only in *Alceste seconda* (1798) that the tragedian will recuperate the figure of the tragic mother and attempt to resolve the difficulties encountered in his previous representations of tragic maternity through the creation of a new model of idealized female heroism.

¹⁵⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 120. See also Trivero, “Polinice,” in *Percorsi alfieriani*, 44. Paola Trivero questions Alfieri’s disdain for the “genere di passione molle materna,” passion which is nonetheless put on vivid display both in *Merope* as well as in *Polinice* through the figure of Giocasta. Trivero concludes that Alfieri’s dissatisfaction with *Merope* lies in his preference for “la madre che soffre,” a figure better embodied by Giocasta at the end of *Polinice* than by *Merope* at the close of her respective tragedy (Trivero, 44).

¹⁵⁵ Raffaello Ramat writes tellingly that “senza il sacrificio della *Merope* non avremmo il rinnovamento del *Saul*” (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 73). For Ramat, the tragedy is an aesthetic sacrifice that prepares Alfieri for a reconquest of tragic style in *Saul*, as the tragic mother-queen retreats to make room for the appearance of Alfieri’s greatest depiction of a tragic father-king. For another analysis on the relationship between *Merope* and *Saul*, see Binni, “Il periodo romano dell’Alfieri e la *Merope*,” in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963*, in particular, pages 307-319.

¹⁵⁶ Numitoria in *Virginia* (versified and re-versed between 1777 and 1783) is perhaps the sole exception to this rule; however, despite being the heroine’s mother, she does not exercise a significant role in the tragedy. For a feminist reading of tragedy’s mother-daughter relationships, see Alison Stone, “Tragedy: An Irigarayan Approach,” in *In Thinking Life with Luce Irigaray: Language, Origins, Art, Love*, ed. Gail M. Schwab (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 227-244. While Alfieri does not eliminate daughters from his tragic theater, his focus is on the tragic mother’s relationship with her son. Interestingly, in his exploration of this relationship, Alfieri, furthermore, reverses the Freudian perspective, critical to Stone’s argument, by concentrating, instead, on the heroine’s conflicted feelings toward her own maternity. With the exception of *Oreste*, the hero-son’s perspective is not as deeply considered.

Chapter 3

Unfaithful Heroines: Infidelity as Renegotiation and Resistance

III.1. Reconsidering Love and Passivity

a. Isabella

In a lengthy letter to Alfieri, dated 20 August 1783 but published the following year, Ranieri de' Calzabigi offers commentary on the tragedian's first four tragic works to appear in print (*Filippo*, *Polinice*, *Antigone*, and *Virginia*).¹ Turning his attention to *Polinice*, Calzabigi writes:

Per quanto osservo nel *Polinice*, ella è maestro nel trattar le tragedie senza amori. Difficile impresa, e sopra tutto per i nostri moderni poeti, ai quali se questa affluente materia venga interdetta, si trovano esausto subito il tesoretto che si son fatto, d'arzigogoli fanciulleschi.²

The poet and librettist goes on to praise Alfieri for his deft handling of the tragedy's subject matter, which derived from antiquity and did without the frivolous love plots seen as proliferating in eighteenth-century Italian tragedy as a consequence of French influence. Calzabigi's obvious distaste for the "arzigogli fanciulleschi" and his telling description of Alfieri as a "maestro" of loveless tragedies speak to the concern on the part of Italian writers and intellectuals over the lack of a legitimate and autonomous tragic theater in Italy. In fact, in the same letter, Calzabigi identifies the overabundance of love affairs and romantic intrigue as a principal defect of eighteenth-century Italian tragedies following in the French tradition.³

¹ For an overview of Calzabigi's correspondence with Alfieri and the stance he took among contemporary critics of Alfierian tragedy, see Angelo Fabrizio, Laura Ghidetti, and Francesca Mecatti, eds., *Alfieri e Calzabigi con uno scritto inedito di Giuseppe Pelli* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2011).

² Ranieri de' Calzabigi, "Lettera di Ranieri de' Calzabigi," in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie e altre prose critiche*, ed. Morena Pagliai (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1978), 195.

³ In this letter, Calzabigi disdainfully describes these Italian tragedies of a French stamp as being full of "piani stravolti, complicati, intralciati, inverisimili" and laced with "amoretti svenevoli," "leziose parole," and "tenerezze triviali," (Calzabigi, 172). He directs his criticism as Racine in particular, who, according to the rules of *bienséance*, endows the heroic Pyrrhus of *Andromaque* with incongruently effeminate "tenerezze, languidezze, vezzi, carezze amorose" (Calzabigi, 182).

Calzabigi's criticisms of the propensity of French tragedies for depicting superficial love entanglements can be read as an objection to the apparent effeminization of French tragedy, a body of literature which he otherwise praises for its refinement, energy, and capacity to generate tragic schools on the basis of the success of its greatest authors, Corneille and Racine. According to Alfieri, who was deeply invested in his program to establish a tragic tradition previously unknown to Italy, love plots, if not provided with a didactic foundation, ran the risk of undermining what must be tragedy's main goal: the ethical and political formation of its spectators. To that end, he declares in his response to Calzabigi that if tragedy is to turn its spectators into lovers, they are to become "amanti della patria."⁴ Nonetheless, of Alfieri's many heroines who were lovers, there were very few whose love, it could be argued, was intended to inspire patriotism.⁵

The anxiety over the place of love in Italian tragedy, as well as in its more established French counterpart, is also evinced in Scipione Maffei's deliberate exclusion of a love subplot from *Merope*, the most celebrated Italian tragedy prior to Alfieri's own tragic works and with whose legacy the latter tragedian contended in his own version. Voltaire, in his attempt to correct the perceived defects of Maffei's tragedy, otherwise followed Maffei in sidelining the traditional amorous subplot between Merope and the tyrant Polyphonte. The aforementioned criticisms of and responses to the apparent superfluity of love in tragedy therefore illustrate one of the longstanding polemics that dominated critical debates surrounding tragedy in the eighteenth century. As Enrico Mattioda observes in his overview of eighteenth-century Italian theoretical

⁴ Alfieri, "Risposta dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 227. "Io credo fermamente, che gli uomini debbano imparare in teatro ad esser liberi, forti, generosi, trasportati per la vera virtù, insofferenti d'ogni violenza, amanti della patria, veri conoscitori dei proprj diritti, e in tutte le passioni loro ardenti, retti, e magnanimi" (Alfieri, 227). In this same response, when referring directly to the role of love in Italian tragic theater, Alfieri adds skeptically: "Anche ammettendo che i principi potessero far nascere un teatro, se non ottimo, buono, e parlante esclusivamente d'amore, non vedo aurora di tal giorno in Italia" (Alfieri, 227).

⁵ Virginia is arguably Alfieri's most patriotic heroine.

evaluations of tragedy, “la galanteria, l’amore diventano i bersagli polemici della critica italiana tesa ad individuare i caratteri nazionali della tragedia in opposizione alla tragedia francese.”⁶ This polemic had important implications for the representation of women in tragedy, since it was generally as love objects or desiring subjects that heroines, typically denied an active political function, gained visibility in the tragic plot. Mothers were perhaps the only obvious exception to this rule.

In addition to the theoretical polemic which argued that love was a largely inferior element incongruous to tragedy, the institution of marriage itself was the subject of numerous treatises in eighteenth-century Italy, as the studies of Luciano Guerci have intelligently pointed out.⁷ These treatises appeared throughout the century, and many men such as Paolo Segneri, Antonfrancesco Bellati, Francesco Beretta, and Giuseppe Antonio Costantini believed the institution to be in a state of crisis in large part due to the new social freedoms permitted to women, which were held to lead to infidelity and dissatisfaction with one’s married life.⁸ Although there existed, as Guerci reveals, the rare treatise that opposed marriage or advocated for divorce, a radical proposition in eighteenth-century Catholic Italy,⁹ the majority of these treatises, often composed by members of the clergy,

⁶ Enrico Mattiotta, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1994), 58.

⁷ See Luciano Guerci, *La sposa obbediente: Donna e matrimonio nella discussione dell’Italia del Settecento* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1988). For a more general but highly useful survey of responses to the polemic concerning women in eighteenth-century Italy, see also Guerci, *La discussione sulla donna nell’Italia del Settecento: Aspetto e problemi* (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1987).

⁸ Alfieri satirizes marriage in the comedy *Il divorzio*. See Alfieri, *Commedie*, ed. Fiorenzo Forti, vol. 3 (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1958).

⁹ See Guerci, *La sposa obbediente*, in particular, the chapter “Contro il matrimonio,” 137-155. Guerci notes that the few treatises opposing marriage often did so from the standpoint of men, thus insisting on the economic and social inconveniences that marriage imposed on husbands. The treatise *Del matrimonio. Discorso del dott. Antonio Cocchio mugellano. Coll’aggiunta del giudizio dato sopra questa operetta da un dottissimo anonimo*, first published in 1762, with London falsely given as the place of publication, is one such example. With regard to the matter of divorce, rarely discussed in eighteenth-century Italian treatises on matrimony, Guerci cites Rufino Massa and Giuseppe Gorani as two advocates for divorce in

largely aimed to circumscribe the role women exercised in conjugal unions, and to describe the ideal comportment they were to adopt within marriage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ideal comportment had as its basis women's tolerance and cheerful suffering within marriage, even within the most infelicitous of conjugal unions. While some treatises sympathized with unhappy wives, with the occasional treatise even acknowledging the reasons for which women might pursue an adulterous relationship, these works as a whole strictly advocated for women's obedience within marriage, relegating wives to a subordinate position with respect to their husbands.¹⁰ It was therefore not only the polemic surrounding love in tragedy which interrogated and attempted to delegitimize the place of love, albeit here in an aesthetic medium with the related polemical discourse taking on nationalistic undertones; the various treatises on marriage, which directed the principal part of their attention at women and at their function within conjugal unions, also worked to problematize and even invalidate female amorous desire, here understood in a sociocultural context. These attempts, one aesthetic and political, the other sociocultural, to diminish the importance of female amorous desire, even going so far, in some cases, as to deny the necessity of it, substantiate the link between female amorous desire and female agency. The polemic concerning the role of love in tragedy looked to curtail drastically the dramatic space women could occupy in tragic plots, and in which they could function as self-fashioners,¹¹ whereas the treatises

the latter half of the eighteenth century. He also identifies Pietro Giannone as another supporter of divorce, even though Giannone's writings on the subject appeared during his long period of incarceration and were not published in his lifetime. See Guerci, *La sposa obbediente*, 179-184.

¹⁰ Guerci writes that one of the few writers to show compassion for married women was Tommaso Campastri, although he still based his ideas of marriage on an inflexible hierarchy in which wives occupied a subordinate position. See Guerci, in particular, pages 95-102.

¹¹ Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French and Italian theoreticians of tragedy maintained that love was not a common feature of ancient Greek tragic works, although amorous passion proliferated in seventeenth-century French tragedies. Enrico Mattiotta observes that Italian thinkers' vehement disdain for the insertion of love within tragic plots contained a moralistic component. Amorous passion was held to undermine the didactic function of tragedy as well as effeminize the tragic hero, whose ability to inspire pity and terror,

which took up the institution of marriage viewed female amorous desire as a liability, even antithetical to matrimony, since it was seen to compromise the inferior position allotted to women in conjugal unions by emboldening them and even encouraging them to seek carnal fulfillment outside the marriage.

Yet despite contemporary concerns, including Alfieri's, about the function love could reasonably exercise in tragedy, love plots abound in Alfierian tragic theater. These depictions of love both reflect and are a reaction to the previously cited aesthetic and sociocultural views that looked with suspicion upon representations of love and female amorous desire in tragedy and saw as transgressive women's actual exercise of amorous desire in society.

Alfierian tragedy investigates the transgressive nature of female amorous desire. However, this desire is not limited to a romantic love which is often forbidden within the tragic plot. Over the course of the tragedy, it becomes, additionally, expressive of another sort of want or lack,¹² this time for agency and autonomy within the tragic plot itself, in which the exigencies of the heroine are often ambivalently sidelined in favor of those of the hero or tyrant, to whom Alfieri

the pillars of Aristotelian tragedy, depended on his necessary "virilità tendente alla prudenza e al rafforzamento dell'uomo stesso tramite la catarsi" (Mattiotta, *Teorie della tragedia*, 60). For a useful study on the various typological representations of women and the role of love within French tragedy, from the late-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, see Vincent Dupuis, *Le Tragique et le Féminin: Essai sur la poétique française de la tragédie (1553-1663)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

¹² In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva analyzes Bernard of Clairvaux's thoughts on love in the twelfth century. In Bernard's doctrine, she writes, love, or *affectus* in the theologian's medieval terminology, remains passive until an external agent stirs it and sets it in motion. Love and desire come to be distinguished in Bernard's writings, such that while love depends on mutual attraction and implies movement toward the beloved object, desire is instead motivated by the lack of the beloved object. See Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 151-157. Kristeva's distinctions between love and desire, as identified in Bernard of Clairvaux's thought, prove helpful in understanding how Alfieri himself represents love and desire in his tragedies, even if Alfierian tragedy itself has no direct connection to the theologian's writings. In order to avoid redundancy, however, and because Alfierian tragedy privileges the lack of the desired object in its love plots, thereby collapsing the semantic distance that Kristeva identifies between the two terms, love and desire will occasionally be used interchangeably. To love is still to lack in large measure in Alfierian tragedy.

devotes considerable attention even in those tragedies which take the name of their heroine. This creates an intriguing anxiety within Alfierian tragedy, which already makes highly, and often deliberately, visible its anxieties concerning other eighteenth-century tragic developments and dilemmas, among which the diminishing role of fate in the tragic action and the lack of a legitimately Italian tragic theater. In the Alfierian tragedies in which the theme of love predominates, love and female amorous desire operate as a contradiction, since Alfierian tragedy is, as has often been described, a theater of psychological solitude.¹³ In other words, it is a theater marked by the profound psychic isolation of its protagonists, what Vittore Branca has defined as “la solitudine dell’uomo con se stesso, insieme bramata e aborrita.”¹⁴ The tragedies of Alfierian heroes and tyrants are, therefore, largely enacted on a private psychological plane to which the other characters are not granted access, and often tellingly conclude with the hero’s, and occasionally the tyrant’s, suicide.

In the closing paragraphs of the essay “The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” included in *Soul and Form*, György Lukács briefly suggests a fundamental difference between men and women within tragedy. This difference illuminates Alfieri’s ambivalence towards and difficulty in representing his tragic heroines and is foregrounded in his portrayal of amorous desire. Commenting on the heroine of Paul Ernst’s *Ninon de l’Enclos*, Lukács questions whether women can, by tragic dictate,

¹³ Raffaello Ramat writes that this solitude reflects that of Alfieri himself: “Il personaggio tragico alfieriano parla sempre a se stesso, non al suo interlocutore: è l’Alfieri che parla a se stesso. Il personaggio alfieriano non agisce, non si muove ma si pone statuariamente gigante in un deserto: è l’Alfieri che si atteggia nel suo sublime mondo eroico. Solitudine che esclude il rapporto tragediabile, e libera invece una lirica tragica,” in Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1958), 17. With regard to the eponymous tyrant of *Filippo*, Mario Trovato writes that he is “perfino consapevole dell’irrazionalità delle sue azioni e dei suoi sentimenti; anzi manifesta il patimento di quella forza che l’obbliga alla crudeltà e alla vendetta. Lo stile del suo discorso rivela il comportamento dell’individuo che si chiude in se stesso, piuttosto che reagire a chi minaccia di penetrare nella sua coscienza per scorprivi reali sentimenti,” in *Il messaggio poetico dell’Alfieri: La natura del limite tragico* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1978), 23.

¹⁴ Vittore Branca, *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile con cinque nuovi studi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1981), 9.

exist independently of the tragedy's male characters to whom she is linked: "Can a woman be tragic in herself and not in relation to the man of her life? Can freedom become a real value in a woman's life?"¹⁵ The indissolubility of the heroine's ties to the tragedy's hero or tyrant is a central preoccupation of Alfierian tragedies in general, whether expressed through the heroine's recourse to silence in opposition to tragic destiny, through her fraught relationship with her son, the tragic hero, or through her amorous desire for the tragic hero or tyrant.

For Lukács, tragic form coheres with tragic essence; the purest expression of human longing for selfhood, what the Hungarian philosopher describes as the "metaphysical root of tragedy," is dependent on tragic form for its realization.¹⁶ Yet Teresa de Lauretis questions the possibility for women to attain selfhood within narrative forms that reduce female characters to plot devices merely placed in service to the male hero. Desire is a constitutive element of narrative, de Lauretis argues; it is the urge that demands that a narrative come into being and provides it with its framework. Crucially, this desire stems from man whose agency the narrative privileges. This agency works to shape the ensuing narrative according to the male protagonist's quest to attain self-knowledge.¹⁷ Woman, then, becomes a mere object to aid the male character on his transformative journey within the narrative; as an unhuman object, she is not, in the words of de

¹⁵ Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974), 174.

¹⁶ Lukacs, 162.

¹⁷ Concerning desire in narrative, de Lauretis writes: "Its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social order, and source of mimetic violence," in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 112. De Lauretis's theoretical work can be used to identify the tragic genre's resistance to female subjectivity as well as the ways in which heroines might achieve even an impartial selfhood through their recognition of their own subjection within the unfolding of the tragic plot. Although she intentionally follows both Aristotle and, more importantly, Freud in affirming the universality of *Oedipus Rex*, thus overlooking how other ancient Greek tragedies depart from this Sophoclean model, de Lauretis suggests important means for examining how the tragic genre, and Alfierian tragedy in particular, can be seen to reflect on its own capacity for subjection in its creation of female characters.

Lauretis, “susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.”¹⁸

As the subsequent analysis will argue, in its representation of amorous desire, Alfierian tragedy becomes an interrogation of the role that the desiring heroine¹⁹ exercises within the tragic plot; moreover, it becomes an exploration of the ties that bind heroines to the heroes and tyrants with whom they must contend for tragic space. If de Lauretis argues that male desire reduces women to a passive entity, a plot device, within a narrative, Alfierian tragedy, then, which generally privileges the amorous desires of its heroines over those of its heroes or tyrants, raises the possibility that female desire might serve to renegotiate and resist, if only partially, the dictates of the tragic genre which demands the reduction of female agency. However, it cannot be forgotten that this female desire remains inscribed within an aesthetic form which, according to de Lauretis, routinely calls into question its legitimacy. And yet, as will be seen, Alfieri routinely returns to the notion of love and female amorous desire, transforming them into an integral, but underappreciated, thematic of his tragic theater.

Alfieri’s first acknowledged love plot is between Isabella and Carlo in *Filippo*, a work which takes as its primary inspiration César Vichard de Saint-Réal’s seventeenth-century novel *Dom Carlos* (1672).²⁰ Among Alfierian tragedies, however, *Filippo* required a particularly

¹⁸ De Lauretis, 119.

¹⁹ For the purposes of this analysis, the designation “desiring heroine” refers to a heroine who loves within the tragic plot and whose right to love is challenged or curtailed by the tragic action, thus linking love to the question of female agency.

²⁰ In the *Vita*, Alfieri writes that the tragedy was “nato francese e figlio di francese” due to its links to Saint-Réal’s novel and his own habit, quickly abandoned, of composing his tragedies in French, given his then unconfident grasp of the Italian language, in *Vita scritta da esso*, vol. 1, ed. Luigi Fassò (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1981), 195.

laborious process of versification before it reached its final form. Alfieri settled on the idea for the tragedy in 1775, then wrote the prose version the following year. The tragedy was subsequently versified that same year before being reworked in 1780 and 1781, ahead of its publication by Pazzini-Carli in the Siennese edition of Alfieri's first ten tragedies in 1783. While *Filippo* has been recognized as motivated principally by the ideological contrasts between the eponymous tyrant and his son,²¹ it is Isabella's soliloquy, in which she expresses her dismay over her inability to eradicate a forbidden amorous desire, with which the tragedy opens. In fact, the tragedy's thematic bipolarity is introduced in the soliloquy's initial word, "desio":

Desio, timor, dubbia ed iniqua speme,
Fuor del mio petto omai. — Consorte infida
Io di Filippo, di Filippo il figlio
Oso amar, io?... Ma chi 'l vede, e non l'ama?

(I, 1, vv. 1-4)

Isabella desires Carlo, Filippo's son, who is also her former betrothed. Having been forcibly wed to his father, she struggles to repudiate her love for Carlo and fears that her love renders her a "consorte infida," an unfaithful consort and unworthy of the king. She is largely ignorant of Filippo's tyranny. As such, within the same soliloquy, she reflects on the adulterous nature of her desire for Carlo, ascribing guilt to herself because of her love as well as expressing her wish to hide the signs of this love from everyone, including herself:

In core
Chi legger puommi? Ah! nol sapess'io, come
Altri nol sa! così ingannar potessi,
Sfuggir così me stessa, come altrui!...
Misera me! sollievo a me non resta
Altro che il pianto; ed il pianto è delitto. —
Ma, riportare alle più interne stanze

²¹ Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vicenza Perdichizzi affirm that "nell'opera il rapporto padre-figlio si sovrappone all'opposizione tirannico-antitirannico," in Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2018), 60. See also Bartolo Anglani, *La tragedia impossibile: Alfieri e la profanazione del tragico* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2018), particularly pages 406-421.

Vo' il dolor mio; più libera...

(vv. 15-22)

With her wish to flee from herself, and therefore from her forbidden love for Carlo, she prefigures, in a certain sense, Mirra, another Alfierian heroine struggling to repress an ultimately irrepressible and illicit amorous desire, this time for her father. As Alfieri's first acknowledged heroine,²² Isabella displays characteristics that will also be recurrent among other Alfierian heroines: a strong capacity for weeping ("pianto") and a marked insistence on secrecy. She seeks a retreat into the confines of her "più interne stanze" where she might safely brood on her sorrow in private. However, the sudden appearance of Carlo prevents her from fleeing.²³

In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri remarks that Isabella and Carlo's love is more chilly than it is passionate due to his reluctance to impinge upon decorum in his depiction of an amorous desire that could be considered incestuous because Isabella is Carlo's stepmother, notwithstanding her original betrothal to the young man before the events of the tragedy begin.²⁴ Additionally, as a married woman, however unhappily wedded, Isabella cannot give open vent to her passion for another man if she is to remain virtuous. To that end, Alfieri writes that because she is "donna e moglie, tanto più dee procedere, e mostrarsi perciò tanto meno appassionata, perfino nei soliloquj

²² While Cleopatra is his first tragic heroine, Alfieri rejected *Antonio e Cleopatra* as a failed youthful endeavor. In his response to Calzabigi, he shares his negative opinion of the repudiated tragedy: "Questa fu, ed è (perché tuttora nascosa la conservo) ciò ch'ella doveva essere, un mostro," in *Parere sulle tragedie e altre prose critiche*, ed. Morena Pagliai (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1978), 217.

²³ "Che veggio? / Carlo? Ah! si sfugga: ogni mio detto o sguardo / Tradir potriami: oh ciel! sfuggasi" (I, 1, vv. 22-24).

²⁴ In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri writes: "Nel medesimo modo, ma per altre ragioni, Carlo non può essere, o non può almeno mostrarsi caldissimo amante in questa tragedia; perché nei costumi nostri, e più ancora nei costumi degli Spagnuoli d'allora, l'amor di figliastro a madrigna essendo in primo grado incestuoso ed orrendo, non si può assolutamente sviluppare, né prestargli quel calore che dovrebbe pure avere in bocca di Carlo, senza rendere questo principe assai meno virtuoso, e quindi come più reo, assai meno stimabile, e men compatito" (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 84).

stessi: perché un animo nato a virtù, neppur con se stesso ardisce pienamente sfogare una simil passione.”²⁵ He will adopt a similar tactic in his portrayal of Mirra, whose transgressive desire for her father comes to be mitigated by the strenuous efforts she takes to silence her passion and keep it hidden even from herself. As a woman already introduced as an adulterer at the onset of *Agamennone*, Clitennestra, on the other hand, does not possess the same degree of virtue as either Isabella or Mirra and can thus openly refer to her illicit passion in her soliloquies.

With her capacity as a desiring heroine limited by her status as Carlo’s stepmother, Isabella takes pains to uphold this role throughout the tragedy. Despite the soliloquy with which *Filippo* opens, and in which she admits to her adulterous affections for the young prince, she works to remind Carlo of the impossibility of their love. In Act I, scene 2, upon encountering him unexpectedly in the Spanish palace, she declares: “E quale speme ha, / che in te non sia delitto?” (vv. 119-120). She considers his hope that she might actually love him a crime. When Carlo refuses to leave her sight, endangering them both given Filippo’s known animosity toward his son, she exclaims: “L’ira del re mertiamo; io, se ti ascolto; / Tu, se prosiegui” (I, 2, vv. 129-130). Mario Fubini argues that the tyrant Filippo serves as the fulcrum of the tragedy, that his cruelty represents an omnipresent nightmare from which the other characters cannot wake²⁶; as such, the love between Isabella and Carlo becomes ancillary to Alfieri’s exploration of Filippo’s unjustifiable malice towards his victims. But although Fubini writes rather critically that “l’amore chiuso di Isabella e di Carlo, che soltanto col silenzio potrebbe esprimersi, si diffonde e stempera in modi metastasiani,”²⁷ Isabella and Carlo do not exhibit the same degree of restraint with regard to their

²⁵ Alfieri, 84.

²⁶ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 98.

²⁷ Fubini, 99. Doubtless Alfieri would have been horrified by Fubini’s criticism. In order to justify his use of a dense and contorted tragic style, wholly unlike the sweet, flowing, syntactically uncomplicated style

desire for each other. Simply put, their love is not expressed in the same terms or under the same conditions. In fact, bound by the dictates of a marriage, however loveless, Isabella can neither receive nor return Carlo's effusive and rash declarations of love. But if she initially escapes the charge of infidelity by governing her passion for the prince, another charge is leveled at her regardless. Declaring her the cause of all his misfortunes, Carlo exclaims: "D'ogni sventura mia / Cagion sei tu, benchè innocente, sola" (I, 2, vv. 65-66). When she remarks on this accusation,²⁸ he explains: "Sì, le mie angosce / Principio han tutte dal funesto giorno, / Che sposa in un data mi fosti, e tolta" (I, 2, vv. 68-70).

Carlo's charge against Isabella reveals the paradoxical position she occupies within the tragedy: she is simultaneously innocent and guilty, that is, in her fidelity to Filippo, the extent of whose depravity she has still to recognize, she still proves worthy of censure on the part of Carlo, whose love her marriage forbids her from reciprocating. Both virtuous and a victim of her virtue, Isabella risks becoming a passive entity within the tragic plot as a result of being the object of Carlo's desire while as yet unable to desire amorously in completely autonomous terms. It is, in part, due to the preponderating tyranny of Filippo, which serves as the tragedy's principal operating force, that she finds herself implicated by what has been identified as the work's

employed by Metastasio, the tragedian rejected the idea that poetic harmony is dependent on the musicality of tragic verses. In the "Risposta dell' Alfieri," Alfieri differentiates the lyricism of tragedy from the lyricism found in other poetic forms, such as the sonnet, madrigal, octave, or song. Insisting that the genre of tragedy requires a style different from either epic or lyric poetry, he takes tragic passion as an example, writing that "l'amor tragico non soffre armonia interamente epica né lirica" (Alfieri, "Risposta dell' Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 230). He adds: "In tragedia un amante parla all'amata; ma le parla, non le fa versi: dunque non le recita affetti con armonia e stile di sonetto; bensì tra il sonetto e il discorso familiare troverà una via di mezzo, per cui l'amata che in palco lo ascolta, non rida delle sue espressioni, come fuor di natura di dialogo; né la platea che lo sta a sentire, rida del suo parlare, come triviale e di comune conversazione" (Alfieri, 230-231).

²⁸ "Cagione / Io delle angosce tue?" (I, 2, vv. 67-68).

tendency toward stasis.²⁹ The oppression of Filippo's tyranny is relentless, inalterable, and, throughout much of the tragedy, unopposed. However, Isabella's passivity within the tragic plot derives, too, from her position as a married woman within a tragedy conspicuously anxious over its portrayal of an amorous desire that threatens to upend decorum.

Like Teresa de Lauretis, Linda Kintz argues that within tragedy male characters are defined by their activity and mobility, since the teleology governing the tragic plot concerns their entry into self-knowledge. On the other hand, characters associated with femininity lack this same measure of mobility and share as an essential characteristic the fact that they exercise a plot function rather than advance within the tragic plot as male characters can and do.³⁰ Generally speaking, *Filippo* is a tragedy that in many respects appears to be the denouement of another tragedy long since set in motion. As Carlo declares to Isabella: "Tutto ei mi ha tolto il di, che te mi tolse" (I, 2, v. 110). Despite being the tragedy's hero, Carlo resigns himself to his fate, to his subjection to Filippo's malice, which will unquestionably end in his demise. Deprived of his former betrothed by his father's machinations, the prince embraces his passivity, going so far as to refuse Isabella's request that he flee from the palace. When she beseeches him,³¹ he responds simply: "Oh donna!... ell'è impossibil cosa" (I, 2, v. 157). Carlo's desire for Isabella is accompanied by his desire for death. While Alfierian heroes in general are characterized by their readiness for death, usually through suicide, Carlo's longing for death, as revealed in his inability

²⁹ See Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 87-102.

³⁰ Taking Oedipal tragedy as her model, Kintz writes that female characters are identified by their passivity within the tragic plot, existing "in a place where they will be *found* then surpassed by the hero," in *The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 44. Male characters act within tragedy, female characters wait.

³¹ "E in un amor l'ultima prova è questa / Ch'io ti chieggio, se m'ami: al crudo padre / Sottratti" (I, 2, vv. 155-157).

to flee the palace where his demise is all but guaranteed, renders him a passive figure within the tragic proceedings. By linking himself inextricably to Isabella, he makes his life dependent on hers and ends up inculcating her for his death, which is seen as inevitable.³² Isabella might therefore neatly conform to Kintz's delineation of a feminine character merely serving a passive plot function were it not for the fact that Carlo himself, the tragedy's hero, surpasses her in passivity. While over the course of the tragedy she slowly comes to recognize the extent of Filippo's cruelty, he is already well apprised of his father's true nature from the very onset of the tragedy and merely takes up, rather than generates, space through his lack of movement within the plot. As a result, his desire for Isabella becomes synonymous with his desire for death by means of his total resignation to his father's tyranny, itself synonymous with the inexorable fate of classical tragedy.³³

Throughout the course of its tragic action, *Filippo* is conscious of the passivity of its heroine and of the restraints imposed by marriage; this consciousness is embedded within the very structure of the tragedy itself due to Alfieri's misgivings about the suitability of the passion

³² Kintz contends that "the tragedy of the masculine subject ... lies in his recognition of his own passivity in a specific and important moment" (Kintz, *The Subject's Tragedy*, 45). She next goes on to state that the tragic genre organizes itself around this "primary, momentous encounter" (Kintz, 45). However, in *Filippo*, Carlo is aware of his passivity from the very beginning of the tragedy, thus he is never made to recognize that which he does not already know. Instead, it is Isabella who comes to realize the conditions of her own passivity in the very moment in which she assumes a more active role in the tragedy through her confrontation with the tyrant. Although this measure of activity inscribes her, according to Kintz, within conduct labeled as isomorphically masculine, it is in her continued recall to the uniquely female parameters of her passivity, that is, her marriage to the tyrant, that Isabella is perhaps able to achieve a distinctly female subjectivity which differentiates her from Carlo, the tragedy's other main victim. The question of female agency, however, remains a pressing one within feminist theory. For possible solutions in the context of drama, see Kintz, pages 97-140.

³³ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 88-90. Fubini argues that Carlo's passivity is not indicative of a poetic defect on Alfieri's part, but is, instead, "una nota essenziale del suo carattere e della tragedia tutta, la manifestazione esteriore di uno stato paradossale e disumano" (Fubini, 89). Carlo's inaction is, therefore, according to Fubini, an expression of Filippo's tyrannical, unassailable dominion against which all attempts at resistance prove futile.

between a stepmother and her stepson as a tragic subject. Isabella's amorous desire is kept in check by her obligation to Filippo, her husband. To emphasize her lack of agency as well as her subjection to his tyranny, Alfieri has the tyrant concoct a scheme through which to confirm his suspicions of his consort's affections for his son. He thus calls on Isabella to serve as arbiter in the case of Carlo, whose support for a group of rebels is a treasonous act, although, in reality, simply a pretense for his implacable and inscrutable hatred of his son. Filippo's feigned reliance on Isabella, whom he calls his counsellor, thrusts the heroine into the political sphere normally denied her. As he explains:

Solo ai pensier di stato
 Gravi al tuo sesso troppo, ognor sottrarti
 Io volli appieno. Ma, per mia sventura,
 Giunto è il giorno, in cui veggo insorger caso
 Ove frammista alla ragion di stato
 La ragion del mio sangue anco è pur tanto,
 Che tu il mio primo consiglier sei fatta.

(II, 2, vv. 33-39)

The tyrant's fiction makes manifest the double helplessness of Isabella in the tragic plot, or the double bind that renders her passive within the tragic events, and which, furthermore, differentiates her passivity from Carlo's. With Filippo employing her as his counsellor simply as a ruse to confirm what he already knows, the tyrant calls attention to her general absence from the political sphere, her inability to express her desire as an unhappily married woman, and her powerlessness to redirect the course of the tragedy, as Carlo's death has already been preordained by his father. Thus, as a queen with no political power and as a wife required to uphold her marriage vows, Isabella exercises no real agency apart from the semblance of it maliciously granted to her by Filippo. Even Carlo participates in this fiction having earlier declared her the cause of his misfortunes, thereby attributing to her an agency to which, within the organization of the tragic

plot, she has no real claim. Finally, Carlo resigns himself to his fate at the hands of his father by choice, refusing to flee all the while openly admitting his passion for Isabella, to whom the tragedy is unable to put a similar choice. Nonetheless, the heroine is made to bear the guilt for an agency she is not permitted to exercise.

Filippo reinforces her lack of agency by emphasizing his status as a “re tradito” and “infelice padre” as a result of Carlo’s alleged perfidy:

Ah! per te stessa il pensa;
Di re tradito, e d’infelice padre,
Qual sia lo stato; e a sì colpevol figlio
Qual sorte a giusto dritto omai si aspetti,
Per me tu il di’.

(II, 2, vv. 96-100)

The heroine’s powerlessness is foregrounded in this overlapping of the political and domestic spheres from which she is either normally excluded, as in the former, or unable to escape, as in the latter. Furthermore, if the tragedy grants Carlo the choice of either accepting or refusing the passivity demanded of him as Filippo’s son, with his desire for Isabella serving as the primary motivation for his decision, it, instead, tightens the uxorial constraints that bind the heroine to Filippo. The tragedy, furthermore, transforms Isabella’s amorous desire into the paradox by which her urge for clemency on the part of her husband betrays her adulterous affections for Carlo while it also confirms her subjection to the former’s tyranny. Although she exclaims: “Misera me!... Vuoi, ch’io / Del tuo figlio il destino?...” (II, 2, vv. 100-101), she attempts to negotiate the overlap of the political and domestic spheres into which Filippo’s proposition has forced her by seemingly reentering the domestic sphere where she can adjudicate Carlo’s case from her position as the former’s wife and the latter’s stepmother, interested in preserving familial rather than political bonds. As such, she urges Filippo to treat Carlo as a wayward son as opposed to a treacherous

subject, since “Dolce è l’ira di un padre” (II, 2, v. 141); or, in other words, a father’s wrath is a useful pedagogical instrument capable of generating the necessary degree of remorse from his errant progeny. She also argues, however, that a father’s mercy will have the desired political consequences by returning Carlo to public esteem and by ridding Filippo himself of the taint of betrayal, unbecoming a king who has no need to fear traitors.³⁴ Aware of the trap that Filippo has set for her, Isabella seeks to negotiate her way out by employing rhetoric applicable to both the political and domestic roles she has been called on to exercise as his counsellor in this matter. Crucially, however, her participation in the tyrant’s scheme is dependent on her ingenuousness, as unlike Carlo, she fails to recognize the extent of Filippo’s malice and thus to observe how by avoiding a simple and unequivocal demand for mercy, she nevertheless serves his purposes and corroborates his suspicions regarding her affection for his son.

Studies analyzing the ways in which women participate in Alfierian tragedy have largely focused on how heroines exercise their agency in service of the family unit. It has been noted that Alfieri depicts female heroism as the consequence of peacemaking, domestic diplomacy, intercession, and the restoration of familial ties.³⁵ To be an Alfierian heroine, therefore, is to be

³⁴ Isabella tries to persuade Filippo:

Oda tua reggia intera,
Ch’ami ed apprezzi il figlio tuo; che degno
Di biasmo, e in un di scusa, il giovanile
Suo ardir tu stimi; e udrai repente allora
La reggia intorno risuonar sue laudi.
Dal cor ti svelli il sospettar non tuo:
Basso terror di tradimento infame,
A re, che merti esser tradito, il lascia.

(II, 2, vv. 146-153)

³⁵ See Stephanie Laggini Fiore, *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). Addressing the function of Alfierian heroines within the tragic action, Fiore writes: “The female character in all these cases, and others, in Alfierian tragedies, urge their male counterparts to pay heed to natural bonds, to place them above all

well-versed in the art of compromise, that is, in the art of sacrificing individuality for the sake of preserving the family.³⁶ Ever since Arnaldo Di Benedetto effected a seismic shift in Alfierian studies by moving beyond the interpretation of Alfieri's tragedies as comprising a political theater, in order to view them, instead, as a "teatro delle passioni,"³⁷ much attention has been paid to the domestic settings of most Alfierian tragedies and the intrafamilial strife from which the conflict of passions characterizing them derives. While this attention has often highlighted the interconnectedness of male and female protagonists within the domestic parameters established by the majority of Alfieri's tragic works, it has far less often interrogated the consequences of this deliberate juxtaposition of the tragic and the domestic playing out in the constitutional makeup of Alfierian heroines. It has also failed to examine sufficiently how, through this juxtaposition, Alfieri makes manifest his conscious and unconscious recognition of the differences the genre of tragedy, especially as understood within the context of late eighteenth-century Italy, both imposes on and reinforces between its male and female characters. Differently put, it has neglected to fully explore just how heroism comes to be gendered in Alfierian tragedy.

else. Most often, however, they go further than simply reminding, recalling the importance of these ties. Amidst strife caused by political or ideological differences, jealousy or misunderstanding, the woman's voice attempts to be heard, urging compromise and understanding, peace and forgiveness" (Fiore, 68). See also Bertilia Herrera, "Racine, Alfieri, and Schiller: A Comparative Study of Heroines" (PhD diss., University of Riverside, 1977).

³⁶ Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 68, 77-78. Fiore vaguely alludes to the failure encountered by the Alfierian heroine as she attempts to preserve the family unit, writing that she "may, inadvertently, be destroying her own role as family maker, as a creator, as she deals with the results of the horror that has gone before" (Fiore, 78). This intriguing proposition receives no further elaboration, however, as Fiore is committed to her thesis that Alfierian heroines are the rational and peacemaking counterparts to the typically impulsive and irrational Alfierian heroes.

³⁷ Arnaldo Di Benedetto, *Le passioni e il limite: un'interpretazione di Vittorio Alfieri* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1994), 61.

It has been argued that in *Filippo* both Carlo and Isabella exhibit similar degrees of passivity and suffer equally under the titular protagonist's tyranny³⁸; yet this is not so, given that Alfieri repeatedly highlights the restrictions placed on Isabella's capacity as a desiring subject due to her marriage to Filippo and concern for Carlo's safety. In so doing, he foregrounds her psychological torment, privileging its examination over a possible, parallel examination into Carlo's torturous desire for his father's wife and former betrothed.

The difference in the degree of passivity that both Carlo and Isabella exhibit can also be glimpsed in the prince's inability to remove himself from the heroine's presence. Having already refused to depart from the palace despite her supplications, he makes it a point to reveal her error in interceding on his behalf with the king: "Or dianzi al genitor tu ardisti / Qui favellare a favor mio: gran fallo" (III, 1, vv. 9-11). In a tragedy which hinges on the stasis consequent to Filippo's unremitting tyranny, and to the bonds of marriage and kinship which serve as an obstacle to Carlo and Isabella's love, the heroine comes once more to assume the guilt for an exercise of agency that is deceptive, given the aforementioned constraints under which she operates in the unfolding tragic plot. Earlier, Filippo had revealed to Carlo her role in securing his pardon, declaring: "A lei, / Più che a me, devi il mio perdono;... a lei" (II, 4, vv. 271-272). The double use of the disjunctive pronoun "lei" sounds a hollow but ominous note; it imposes the appearance of agency on Isabella to whom the freedom to intercede openly on behalf of Carlo was never granted. Furthermore, Filippo's words are deliberately ironic in their foreshadowing of the end Carlo will meet as a result

³⁸ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 93. On the interrelationships between the three main characters of the tragedy, Fubini writes: "Si può dubitare se questi personaggi possono essere descritti uno per uno e non piuttosto considerati quasi tre faccie di un medesimo prisma. Carlo ed Isabella, ad ogni modo, — si deve affermarlo, perché troppo spesso si legge il contrario, — stanno nel primo piano: Filippo... finisce per essere, più che un individuo accanto ad altri individui, un incubo pauroso, da cui le due vittime si sentono dominate" (Fubini, 93-94).

of Isabella's betrayal of her affection for the prince when she displayed her concern for his wellbeing in her audience with the king.

With regard to her supposed culpability, Isabella also takes it upon herself to assume guilt within the tragedy. In her opening soliloquy, as previously seen, she expresses her remorse over her adulterous love for Carlo. Additionally, already the declared cause of the prince's misfortunes, verified in Filippo's premonitory remark that his pardon of Carlo owes itself to her intercession, she blames herself for the fractured relationship between father and son. In the first scene of Act III, she laments the divisions she has caused between the pair:

Ti è padre,
 Ti è padre in somma: e fia giammai ch'io creda,
 Ch'unico figlio, il genitor non l'ami?
 L'ira ti accieca; un odio in lui supponi,
 Che allignar non vi può.... Cagion son io,
 Misera me! che tu non l'ami.

(vv. 29-34)

As the first acknowledged heroine of Alfierian tragedy, Isabella with her call for familial unity confronts a dilemma recurrent among Alfierian heroines. By working to restore the bonds between Carlo and Filippo, despite her passion for the former, she foreshadows other heroines such as Antigone and Micol (*Saul*, 1782), whose respective tragedies task them with resolving intrafamilial conflict. This conflict generally arises between a father, the tragedies' tyrant, and his son, either the heroines' lover or spouse. But while it has previously been recognized that Alfierian heroines do act in service of the family within the tragic plot, what has been neglected is the crucial point that these same heroines, and of the three mentioned, especially Isabella and Antigone, are often the source, if simply ostensibly, of this conflict. By being the desired object of the heroic son, these heroines insert themselves between father and son. Additionally, the attempts by these heroines to resolve intrafamilial tensions come at the cost of their ability to act as a desiring subject

within the tragedy; if amorous desire lies at the root of the antagonism between father and son within the tragic plot, it is often the heroine who must either renounce or repress her desire for the son in her efforts to bring about a resolution. In Alfierian tragedy, the heroic son continues to desire the heroine, but as for the heroine, she finds her own amorous desire antagonistic to the restoration of familial bonds whose disintegration is pinned, more often than not, on her.

Amorous desire, then, is often an obstacle in Alfierian tragedy; it must be repudiated by the desiring heroine in order to effect the reconciliation between father and son, a reconciliation for which Alfierian tragic theater has no room given that its primary motor is frequently irresolvable intrafamilial conflicts. But this amorous desire, if given up by the heroine in an ultimately futile gesture, becomes, too, the means by which she can mount a sort of resistance to the familial obligations that call for her submission to the family's interests. In reclaiming for herself the desire that marriage and her position as stepmother to Carlo have forced her to repress, Isabella pushes back at the forces necessitating her passivity within the tragic plot. When Filippo's minister Gomez informs her that Carlo has been imprisoned and sentenced to death for attempted parricide, a presumably invented charge, although Alfieri is deliberately ambiguous as to this point,³⁹ Isabella, motivated by love, begs to be brought to Carlo in order to convince him one last time to flee.⁴⁰ Her resolution to convince Carlo to flee, in defiance of her obligation to Filippo her

³⁹ Calzabigi laments in his letter to Alfieri the tragedian's deliberate obscurity with regard to the veracity of Filippo's accusation of parricide: "Avrei, per altro, desiderato che fosse meglio sviluppata l'accusa del re contro il figlio d'averlo voluto trucidare. Non ben si rileva, se l'attentato sia fondato sul vero, o se sia puro pretesto del padre per rendere il principe reo ed odioso" (Calzabigi, "Lettera di Ranieri de' Calzabigi," in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 195). In his response, Alfieri attributes this obscurity, in part, to his desire to bestow on Filippo the "feroce e cupo carattere del Tiberio di Tacito," achievable only through the attribution of "moltissima oscurità, dubbiezza, contraddizione apparente, e sconessione di ordine di cose" to the tyrant's conduct (Alfieri, "Risposta dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 220).

⁴⁰ "Al carcer suo mi guida: / Ivi hai l'accesso al certo: io mi lusingo / Di risolverlo a fuga" (IV, 5, vv. 264-266).

husband, contains nonetheless a certain measure of naïve ignorance, which she reveals when beseeching the tyrant's minister:

Al suo fuggire i mezzi
 Appresta intanto; e di arrear sospendi
 Fatal sentenza, che sì tosto forse
 Non si aspetta dal re.

(IV, 5, vv. 268-271)

Neither believing Carlo's "fatal sentenza" an act commensurate with Filippo's normal pattern of rule, nor penetrating the deception of Gomez, who has throughout the tragedy demonstrated his obsequious allegiance to the tyrant, Isabella proceeds to the final act propelled by her passion for Carlo and yet still incognizant of the real danger which she faces no less than the prince.

The final act of *Filippo* stages the culmination of the tyrant's brutality and seals the inexorable paternal hatred which, despite the political gloss Alfieri seemingly imparts to it,⁴¹ has served as the tragedy's principal motivation in the preceding acts. But alongside this apogeeal depiction of paternal animosity whose fatal consequences have long been anticipated, appears Isabella's own complete realization of the tyrannical forces to which she has been subjected throughout the tragedy. *Filippo*, thus, if rendered static by the tyrant's unrelenting and impenetrable odium, is granted a kind of tragic movement in the form of the heroine's epistemological conquests through which she apprehends, finally, the extent of Filippo's cruelty as well as the tyranny that is the loveless marriage she earlier tried to uphold.

⁴¹ The irrationality of Filippo's tyranny and its psychological exploration on the part of Alfieri, especially in the tragedy's concluding scene, lead Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vicenza Perdichizzi to argue that *Filippo* is more than simply a dramatized rhetorical condemnation of tyranny. See Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 57.

Isabella's final attempt to convince Carlo to flee proves a useless enterprise, as he stays resolute in his decision to perish at the hands of his father rather than leave her.⁴² He even reproaches her for her incredulity when she reveals that she turned to Gomez for assistance in liberating him from his imprisonment: "Incauta! ahi troppo / Credula tu! che festi?" (V, 2, vv. 64-65). It is here that awareness quickly dawns on the heroine; after Carlo explains Gomez's deception, she is led to ask: "E fia pur ver, ch'infra tal gente io tragga / Gl'infelici miei di?" (V, 2, vv. 101-102). When Carlo insists that she flee for her own safety, she resists, expressing a desire for death that will only strengthen as the act reaches its conclusion: "A me la vita / Cara?..." (V, 2, vv. 106-107).

Filippo's confrontation with Isabella and Carlo in the final act's penultimate scene centers the tragedy's closing proceedings on the nature of amorous desire within the tragic plot and the role it has exercised throughout it. In his last encounter with his son and consort, the tyrant makes manifest not only the full extent of his hatred for Carlo but the degree to which this same hatred extends to Isabella herself. His verbal assault lingers on the particular quality of her guilt and infidelity:

Iniqua donna,
 Nol creder già, che amata io t'abbia mai;
 Nè, che gelosa rabbia al cor mi desse
 Martíro mai. Filippo, in basso loco,
 Qual è il tuo cor, l'alto amor suo non pone;
 Nè il può tradir donna che il mertì. Offeso
 In me il tuo re, non il tuo amante, hai dunque.
 Di mia consorte il nome, il sacro nome,
 Contaminato hai tu.

(vv. 141-149)

⁴² "Gran tempo è già, ch'io di morir sol bramo" (V, 2, v. 40).

Filippo's words serve as both the open expression of his implacable hatred and the expression of certain anxieties concerning the place of love and amorous desire in the tragedy. His hatred, as he admits, derives less from his status as a betrayed husband, from the adulterous affections of his wife, than from the affront to what Walter Binni has described as "quella suprema libertà, quell'affermazione totale del proprio superbo desiderio di assoluto potere e dominio."⁴³ As such, Isabella is condemnable not so much for her lack of fidelity to her marriage vows as for her insult to Filippo's kingship through her unseemly affections for Carlo. This distinction reveals how amorous desire occupies an ambivalent presence in the tragedy: it is at once both the impetus for the tragic events and a mere pretense for Filippo's ultimately inscrutable animosity. Additionally, as with his other desiring heroines, Alfieri's interrogation of the place of amorous desire in tragedy demonstrates how this desire is not coterminous with a heroine's seductive capacities. Although Isabella finds her love reciprocated, a rare occurrence in Alfierian tragedy, she is nonetheless rejected as an object of desire by the tyrant himself, and thus exercises no influence over him as a result of this inability to conjure desire within him. Filippo's admission of the little love that is lost for her can be read as a consequence of Alfieri's anxiety over crafting an Italian tragedy liberated from the love plots seen to proliferate in French tragic theater. If his is not an attempt to expunge amorous desire as an operating force from the tragic plot, he still endeavors to neutralize it and subordinate it to Filippo's irrational jealousy motivated by an unremitting lust for power, and which Alfieri believed to be superior to a jealousy prompted by love.⁴⁴ In the tyrant's repudiation of the heroine as a desired object, there is, too, Alfieri's suspicion of the heroine as a desiring subject.

⁴³ Walter Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 66.

⁴⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 84. "Filippo in questa tragedia è geloso, ma non per amore; ed è mille volte più superbo, vendicativo, e crudele" (Alfieri, 84).

And yet, despite this, amorous desire is not so neatly devitalized within the tragedy, since it is through her desire for Carlo that Isabella confirms her full understanding of Filippo's tyranny and enacts a measure of resistance that has been foreign to her until now. Although Carlo passively awaits death at his father's hands, Isabella actively pursues death. When Filippo questions her silence while accusing her of infidelity, she speaks for the first time in open defiance of her consort:

...In me il silenzio nasce,
 Di timor no; stupore alto m'ingombra
 Del non credibil tuo doppio, feroce,
 Rabido cor. — Ripiglio al fin, ripiglio
 Gli attoniti miei spiriti... Il grave fallo
 D'esserti moglie, è alfin dover ch'io ammendi. —
 Io finor non ti offesi: al cielo in faccia,
 In faccia al prence, io non sono rea: nel mio
 Petto bensì....

(V, 3, vv. 196-204)

As the tragedy reaches its close, and despite Filippo's (and Alfieri's) claim that he is motivated by other than the jealousy of a potentially cuckolded husband, the work oscillates between the tyrant's deeply rooted and enigmatic hatred and Isabella's admission of her passion for Carlo. The tragedy wavers between these two forces—Filippo's unremitting odium and Isabella's amorous desire—such that it concludes with a contest of wills between the tyrant and the heroine. Isabella asserts her fidelity to Filippo but, now emboldened by her realization of his iniquities, also declares her affections for Carlo, which render her “rea” in thought, although not in deed. Earlier in the tragedy, Isabella had been made to assume the guilt for Carlo's passivity, that is, his inactivity when faced with his father's tyranny, as well as the guilt for his death when forced by Filippo to act as arbiter in the case regarding the prince's alleged treason. By actively assuming guilt in her confrontation with Filippo, she reverses her earlier passivity and inserts herself as an active presence within the work's final proceedings. As argued earlier, this shucking off of her former passivity is only made

possible by her recognition of Filippo's cruelty, and, consequently, of her own repression. It is this discovery which instills the tragedy with a certain dynamism otherwise lacking in its portrayal of Filippo's unyielding lust for violence and dominion. Finally, while *Filippo* has been acknowledged as a psychological portrait of tyranny and its accompanying arbitrariness,⁴⁵ by embedding Isabella's discovery of Filippo's iniquity and the nature of her own repression within the tragic action, Alfieri foregrounds, too, the heroine's psychology and further differentiates her character from that of Carlo, to whom she has typically been linked in critical assessments of the tragedy.⁴⁶ The change wrought to her character after her complete recognition of Filippo's tyranny is evidenced by her following retort to the king: "Uso a vedermi / Tremar tu sei; ma più non tremo" (V, 3, vv. 233-234).

Filippo closes with the contest between Carlo and Isabella to determine which lover's death might satisfy the tyrant's bloodlust. Each demands the right to die so as to spare the other, with Isabella no less vehement in her desire for death than Carlo. Filippo settles the matter by forcing the pair to choose between two methods of suicide. When Carlo opts for the dagger proffered by the tyrant, Isabella is prevented from selecting poison, the remaining option, as Filippo intends to prolong her suffering by keeping her alive so that she can live out the rest of her days in sorrow.⁴⁷ The tyrant's planned punishment is repugnant to Isabella, who comments not on her separation from Carlo but, rather, on the idea of continuing in her untenable marriage to the odious king: "Viverti al fianco?... io sopportar tua vista?... / Non fia mai, no... Morir vogl'io..." (V, 4, vv. 273-

⁴⁵ See Laura Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti. "Affetti naturali" e "affetti di libertà" nelle tragedie alfieriane*. (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2017), 53-73.

⁴⁶ For one such example, see Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, in particular, pages 92-94.

⁴⁷ "Da lui disgiunta, / Sì, tu vivrai; giorni vivrai di pianto: / Mi fia sollievo il tuo lungo dolore" (V, 4, vv. 268-270).

274). Her resolve to die becomes, then, not simply a sympathetic response to Carlo's death; it is also a wholesale rejection of her marriage to Filippo, an act of resistance consequent to her newly gained appreciation for his malice and immorality. Having been refused the poison by which she would have followed Carlo in death, she snatches Filippo's dagger and commits suicide. In order to differentiate still further the characters of Carlo and Isabella, it is crucial to note that the former kills himself with the dagger handed to him, while the latter actively reaches out and grabs the weapon from the unsuspecting tyrant. For Alfieri, suicide is rarely, if ever, an act of renunciation or of resignation to the overwhelming crush of fate; instead, it is a gesture of defiance mounted in the face of insurmountable oppression. Isabella's death serves as her vindication of an autonomy denied her as a result of her conjugal union with the tyrant. Although the tragedy centers its focus largely on the conflict between father and son, by having her suicide come after Carlo's, the work demonstrates its greater interest in the heroine's psychological development than in the prince's, and locates in her death a certain conclusive horror evidently not found in Carlo's suicide.

The ending of *Filippo*, however, manifests Alfieri's continued anxiety over the role exercised by amorous desire within the tragic action. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, he insists that the tragedy's final sequence of machinations, reveals, and bloodshed does not produce its intended effect, having been designed "assai più per gli occhi, che per gli orrecchi."⁴⁸ The reason for this lies, arguably, in his hesitation to invest in the tragedy's love plot, given his distaste for the clichéd expressions of sentimentality seen as characteristic of French tragedy, as well as his uncertainty over the possible incestuous implications raised by the love between a stepmother and stepson. Consequently, while Isabella exercises a newfound measure of autonomy in challenging the tyrant's authority through her suicide, her ability to love as a desiring heroine is kept in check by

⁴⁸ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 86.

Alfieri's external aesthetic and moral concerns. These concerns engender a not insignificant degree of ambivalence within the tragedy, leaving the work unable to commit fully to the love plot it develops but also unwilling to betray it completely. As Gomez admits to Isabella in Act IV: "La origin vera / Dei misfatti di Carlo, è in parte, amore..." (5, vv. 189-190). By specifying that Carlo's alleged misdeeds only partially resulted from his passion for Isabella, the adverbial expression "in parte" comes to represent the tension between the two forces motivating the tragedy: Isabella and Carlo's fatal amorous desire and Filippo's inexorable lust for power. With Alfieri unwilling to reconcile them, these two forces conclude in a stalemate that perhaps explains the tragedy's tendency toward stasis.

b. *Ottavia*

If in *Filippo* Alfieri dramatizes the anxieties motivating his depiction of amorous desire, which is circumscribed by questions of tragic suitability and decorum as well as the tragedian's own participation in the eighteenth-century polemic concerning the national character of Italian tragedy, it is in *Ottavia* that these anxieties become the principal mover of the tragic action. Alfieri wrote the prose version of the tragedy in 1780, then versified the work between 1780-1781, before returning to the tragedy in 1782. *Ottavia*, furthermore, was written during a period in which the tragedian was conspicuously interested in writing female protagonists. The same year he completed the versification of *Ottavia*, he finished work on the tragedies *Maria Stuarda* and *Rosmunda* as well as entirely composed and versified the tragedy *Merope*. Additionally, *Ottavia* represents Alfieri's return to subjects drawn from antiquity after a series of tragedies, including the aforementioned *Maria Stuarda* and *Rosmunda*, with more modern plots and casts of characters.

The eponymous heroine of *Ottavia* is a deliberately passive figure whose amorous desire is complicated by the fact that it is channeled toward the tyrant. In her passion for Nerone, who repudiates her and seeks her death, *Ottavia* differs from *Isabella* whose odium for Filippo, cultivated over the course of the tragedy, becomes an expression of her resistance to the tyrant and his iniquity. *Ottavia*, for her part, never renounces her affections for Nerone, thereby demonstrating Alfieri's disinterest in a univocal representation of female amorous desire. But by foregrounding the heroine's passivity in the tragic action, he troubles his former linking of female amorous desire to female agency, as seen in the case of *Isabella*, since *Ottavia* passively suffers Nerone's abuse due to her love for him. It is this capacity for an inflexible forbearance on her part which drew negative responses from critics,⁴⁹ and which Alfieri himself only justified with considerable

⁴⁹ See Melchiorre Cesarotti, "Lettera dell'abate Cesarotti su *Ottavia*, *Timoleone e Merope*," in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 247-261.

difficulty.⁵⁰ Through his depiction of Ottavia, the tragedian reflects in a sustained way on the question of passivity. Furthermore, by constructing a tragedy principally animated by the inactivity, the non-resistance of its heroine, he attempts a renegotiation of the antinomic relationship between passivity and agency.⁵¹ *Ottavia*, therefore, puts at stake the operative potential of its heroine through its examination of the ways in which amorous desire participates in and subtends the interrelationships between the tragedy's male and female figures. Ottavia's willing dependence on Nerone serves as the tragedy's main conflict. In his efforts to transform this conflict into suitably tragic material, Alfieri interrogates once more the nature of amorous desire in his tragic theater and its ability to illuminate the extent of female agency within the tragic action. With *Ottavia*, he approaches certain limits in his representation of desiring heroines within his tragic theater⁵² and demonstrates the representational slippage experienced by the female subject who is alternately an ideal and a fully realized and authentic subject in her own right, as described by Teresa de Lauretis.⁵³ The ways in which *Ottavia* both becomes defined and eludes

⁵⁰ See Alfieri's response to Cesarotti's criticisms in "Note dell'Alfieri, che servono di risposta," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 262-277.

⁵¹ While *Ottavia* refers to her love ("amore") for Nerone throughout the tragedy, the lack of mutuality and what has been identified as Ottavia's jealousy toward Poppea, Nerone's mistress, suggest that Alfieri here is also dealing in desire, which for Kristeva is, as the opposite of love, associated with lack and passivity (Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 155-157).

⁵² These limits will be conclusively reached in the subsequent *Mirra*, in which the illicit desire of the heroine is unnamable until the work's final scene and unrepresentable to the point of necessitating the heroine's suicide once the object of her passion, i.e. her father, is brought to light.

⁵³ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 10. De Lauretis describes this slippage as women's capacity to be "both inside and outside gender, at once within and without representation" (de Lauretis, 10). For de Lauretis, once women escape the confines of an ideal representation of femininity and womanhood, as perpetuated by patriarchal gender constructs, they cease to be completely representable, since they must live the contradiction between acting as "historical subjects governed by real social relations" (de Lauretis, 10) and being objects shaped by the idealized representations of gender differences that are produced by the very society in which they take part.

representation within the tragic action through her seemingly passive amorous desire for Nerone provide further insight into how the abutment of gender representation and form is a constitutive anxiety within Alfierian tragedy, while also informing Alfieri's interest in complex, multilayered psychological depictions of his female heroines.

In *Filippo*, Isabella enacts a resistance to the constraints of marriage through her confrontation with the tyrant at the conclusion of the tragedy. This confrontation is made possible by her entry into the knowledge of her own repression at the hands of Filippo. Ottavia, instead, throughout her respective tragedy, persists in her fidelity to Nerone despite his contempt and mistreatment of her. She is fully cognizant of his desire for her death both to quell political turmoil and to secure his marriage to his mistress, Poppea. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri admits that this fidelity to Nerone, notwithstanding his abuse, derives from the need for emotional symmetry within the tragedy so as to reinforce the unjust nature of the tyrant's treatment of the repudiated heroine. Ottavia's love, not tempered by any hate, increases the odiousness of Nerone as well as the audience's sympathy for her situation, as Alfieri writes: "Se Ottavia abborisse Nerone come il dovrebbe, Nerone ne riuscirebbe di tanto meno biasimevole di ucciderla, ed ella di tanto meno da noi compatibile."⁵⁴ This comment illustrates the aesthetic factors necessitating Ottavia's extreme passivity within the tragic action, since her devotion to Nerone creates a stark emotional contrast between them, which augments the horror of the tyrant's actions. However, Alfieri's admission that Ottavia's hatred of Nerone would be justifiable indicates that within his theater hatred is not a sentiment typically associated with virtuous heroines. Both Clitennestra and Rosmunda are animated by hatred in their respective tragedies, but unlike either Ottavia or Isabella, they function

⁵⁴ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 116-117.

as tyrannical protagonists within the tragic plot, although their portrayal is not entirely unsympathetic.

Alfieri embeds this dichotomy between hatred and love, closely linked to the dichotomy between repulsion and desire, within the opening scene of *Ottavia*. When asked by his loyal but morally conflicted counselor Seneca what he lacks, Nerone simply utters the word “pace” (1, v. 1) before clarifying that peace would be his had he not joined in marriage with Ottavia: “Intera / L’avria Neron, se di abborrito nodo / Stato non fosse a Ottavia avvinto mai” (vv. 2-4). The tyrant’s reference to the “abborrito nodo” by which he is bound to the heroine contrasts with Seneca’s subsequent response in which he insists on Ottavia’s continued devotion to Nerone despite his ill treatment of her, his lack of gratitude for the political success her marriage brought him, and his passion for his mistress:

Ma tu, de’ Giulj il successor, del loro
Lustro e poter l’accrescitor saresti,
Senza la man di Ottavia? Ella del soglio
La via t’apri: pur quella Ottavia or langue
In duro ingiusto esiglio: ella, che priva
Di te così, benchè a rival superba
Ti sappia in braccio, (ahi misera!) ancora t’ama.

(I, I, vv. 5-11)

At the onset of the tragedy, Seneca thus provides reasons for which Ottavia would be justified in her enmity of Nerone, yet the tragic proceedings will overturn this assumption. It is this seeming lack of verisimilitude which prompted Melchiorre Cesarotti’s lengthy objection:

Ottavia è un modello di virtù, e di rassegnazione; e sostenuto egregiamente da capo a fondo. Solo può trovarsi a ridire ch’ella conservi amore per Nerone. Che soffre tutto, che non si risenta, che non voglia prestarsi alla sollevazione suscitata per lei, per non irritar maggiormente il tiranno, per la speranza di disarmarlo colla sua dolcezza, per non dargli il menomo pretesto di accusarla, per senso del proprio decoro, per disprezzo tranquillo della morte; tutto ciò è grande ed eroico: ma come può, senza farsi torto, conservar proprio amore per un tal mostro?⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Cesarotti, “Lettera dell’abate Cesarotti,” in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 250-251.

Aligning himself rather closely, although perhaps ironically, with the more conservative writers on marriage in the eighteenth century, who insisted on the absolute quality of wives' devotion to their husbands, Cesarotti adds that Ottavia's extreme fidelity "potrebbe a stento essere un merito in una moglie cristiana, in cui l'amor conjugale è un dovere, e la sofferenza una perfezion religiosa. Ma Ottavia non è né cristiana, né moglie."⁵⁶ The poet and translator therefore locates the tragedy's central tension, or, rather, what for him constitutes its principal defect, in this depiction of a heroine who as a model of Roman virtue nonetheless loves beyond limit and reason.

Although it is her limitless and seemingly unjustified passion which serves to drive the tragic action, Ottavia is noticeably absent from the first act of the tragedy through a technique utilized by Alfieri in other tragedies such as *Mirra*, in which the heroine's entrance is delayed until the second act. Despite her late appearance in the tragedy, Ottavia remains the object of discussion throughout the first act. Having already murdered her father, Claudio, and brother, Britannico, in his bid for power, Nerone blames Ottavia for inciting the people to speak against him, and considers her the instrument of his troubles, declaring to Seneca: "Stromento già di mia grandezza forse / Ell'era: ma, strumento de' miei danni / Fatta era poscia" (I, 1, vv. 12-14). He adds that even in exile, into which she was sent after his repudiation of her and their marriage, Ottavia remains the source of the mob's rabblorousing: "E tal pur troppo ancora / Dopo il ripudio ell'è" (I, 1, vv. 14-15). Political concerns thus ostensibly subtend Nerone's hatred of the heroine, since Alfieri, as also demonstrated by other tragedies, remains here interested in the capacity for tragedy to bring

⁵⁶ Cesarotti, 251. Cesarotti adds that Ottavia's continued love for Nerone "passa i confini della virtù, e si accosta a una debolezza, che non potendo esser né lodata, né compatita, indispono più che interessi" (Cesarotti, 251). In his reply to Cesarotti, Alfieri agrees that Ottavia's irrepressible love constitutes a weakness, but denies that this weakness repulses audiences. Instead, he argues that the work's main interest derives from Ottavia's psychological anguish as a result of her inability to master this affection for Nerone. See Alfieri, "Note dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 262-263.

about societal reform through depictions of classical examples of tyranny from which spectators would be able to draw connections to their own contemporary tyrannical rulers.⁵⁷ Yet, as Alfieri admits in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, the tragedy's political subplot, i.e. the people's outrage at Nerone's iniquity, functions largely as a means of furthering the tragic action and is therefore ancillary to the work's central focus: the conflict between Ottavia and Nerone, whose import is more domestic than political. Alfieri writes that without the political influence the heroine, even in her exile, exercises over the people, the tragedy would not last "oltre due atti," since "all'arrivo di Ottavia, se le avventerebbe egli [Nerone], e la svenerebbe."⁵⁸ He justifies the timor provoked in Nerone as a result of Ottavia's perceived sway over the Roman people on the grounds that, without it, the tragic action collapses and cannot carry the tragedy to completion. But as the tragedy progresses, Ottavia's political influence will only underscore her own passivity, given her later disavowal of the people's threat of rebellion and her repeated concern for Nerone's safety.

Although she does not appear in the first act, the tragedy invests Ottavia, then, with a political power whose validity her own subsequent inactivity and passion for Nerone will undermine over the course of the tragic action. However, the work's deeper interest in a tragic exploration of more domestic sentiments such as jealousy, hatred, and love, is evinced by the

⁵⁷ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 116. In his commentary on *Ottavia*, Alfieri writes: "Chi può dubitare che se in Roma ai tempi di Caligola, di Nerone, di Domiziano, e di tante altre simili fiere, vi fosse stato un ottimo e continuo teatro, in cui fra molte altre rappresentazioni una avesse ritratto dal vero alcun simile inaudito tiranno; chi può dubitare che questo non sarebbe stato un terribilissima freno a coloro affinché tali non divenissero, o che se pure lo divenivano, non li soffrissero i popoli? Si dirà, che tali mostri venendo al principato, tutto impediscono sconvolgono e spengono. Rispondo, che il tiranno può spegner tutto, fuorché una ottima tragedia, di cui potrà bensì sospendere od impedire la recita, ma non toglier mai che gli uomini la leggano, che si ricordino d'averla vista recitare, che ne sappiano gl'interi squarci a memoria, e che debitamente gli adattino: anzi, coll'impedirli o sospenderli, ne invoglierà egli vie più gli uditori; svelerà maggiormente se stesso; e si andrà così preparando maggiori ostacoli nella opinione di tutti: e da questa sola universal opinione dipende pur sempre, qual ch'egli sia, interamente tutto il potere suo. Io stimo dunque Nerone un personaggio non molto commovente in palco, ma moltissima utile" (Alfieri, 116).

⁵⁸ Alfieri, 117.

introduction, still in the first act, of Poppea, Nerone's mistress. Serving as a foil for the virtuous Ottavia, Poppea is a character new to Alfieri's tragic pantheon, in which interactions between women without familial ties are rare. If Alfierian tragedy insists on the psychological solitude of its heroes, it tends, too, to isolate its female characters, whose interactions with other women are generally limited to their exchanges with anguished and guilt-ridden mothers (Antigone, Elettra), if these interactions even occur at all.⁵⁹ The affection cultivated between Argia and Antigone is an exception, not the rule, within Alfierian tragic theater.⁶⁰

His love for Poppea prompts Nerone to declare:

Ottavia abborro; oltre ogni dir Poppea
 Amo; e mentir l'odio e l'amore io deggio?
 Ciò non al più vil de' servi miei non vieta
 Forza di legge, il susurrar del volgo
 Fia che s'attenti oggi a Neron vietarlo?

(I, 2, vv. 127-131)

In addition to his repudiation of Ottavia, the tyrant's open preference for Poppea has triggered the murmurs of the plebeians. It will also sharpen the edge of his hatred of his former consort throughout the tragedy. Indeed, the first act of the tragedy redounds to Nerone's antipathy towards the heroine; he even announces at one point that he will murder her.⁶¹ When Poppea expresses her

⁵⁹ Other isolated heroines within Alfieri's tragic pantheon include Sofonisba, Merope, Micol, and Mirra. The first three women are the only female characters within their respective tragedies, while Mirra, despite sharing tragic space with her mother, Cecri, and nurse, Euricléa, experiences near total psychological isolation due to the illicit and unspeakable nature of her desire for her father. In her interactions with her mother and nurse amidst her struggle to keep her secret passion concealed, Mirra finds that her unintelligible discourse only alienates her from these other women, since they unknowingly press her to share what is unutterable.

⁶⁰ Another positive female relationship in Alfierian tragedy can be found in *Virginia* (1777-1781). The eponymous heroine's affectionate relationship with her mother, Numitoria, is, however, like Argia and Antigone's sororal bond, a rarity within Alfierian tragic theater.

⁶¹ "Al suolo appena / Trabalzerà l'ultima testa, in cui / Roma fonda sua speme" (I, 3, vv. 153-155).

fear that the coming of Ottavia, who has been summoned to Rome, will put his affections for her to the test, he attempts to soothe his mistress:

Poppea, deh! cessa: nel mio amor ti affidai.
 Mai non temer della mia fede: al mio
 Voler bensì temi d'opportuni. Abborro,
 Io più che tu, colei che rival nomi.

(I, 3, vv. 236-239)

In his hatred of Ottavia, and in his declarations of fidelity to Poppea, Nerone establishes a current of amorous desire which will run parallel to Ottavia's own throughout the rest of the tragedy. Although this fidelity to his mistress is ironic in the face of his rejection of Ottavia, and exceptional given the fact that very few tyrants with Alfierian tragedy find their cruelty motivated by amorous passion, Alfieri resists any facile oppositions between Nerone's desire for Poppea and Ottavia's desire for Nerone that tip the balance unproblematically in Ottavia's favor. Both expressions of amorous desire will be viewed as excessive and morally flawed in their own right.

Although Ottavia enters the tragedy in the second act, it is not until the penultimate scene that she appears. If in *Mirra* the eponymous heroine's delayed arrival (she appears, like Ottavia, in Act II) serves to intensify the scrutiny to which she is subjected by her concerned parents, setting off an ultimately fatal pattern of misreadings of her weeping and other strange behaviors, in *Ottavia* the heroine's downfall is carefully plotted by Poppea and Tigellino, praetorian prefect and Nerone's aide. Fearing that Ottavia's influence over the Roman populace will induce Nerone to keep her alive in order to avoid any political backlash, Tigellino concocts the lie that she has betrayed Nerone with Eucero, her musician, in the hope that the people might withdraw their support of her and the tyrant might thus be emboldened to arrange her death.

Unlike Isabella in *Filippo*, Ottavia is ostensibly the main focus of the tragic work which bears her name. Because of this, her tragedy meditates more consciously and at length on the guilt

with which she is burdened as a result of her amorous desire and on the precarious position she consequently occupies within the tragic action. During his audience with Nerone, Tigellino offers this advice in order to silence the tyrant's critics: "Svela i falli d'Ottavia, e ogni uom fia muto" (II, 3, v. 124); Ottavia's grave "falli" will result from allegedly misplaced affections, thus foregrounding the role exercised by amorous desire within the tragic action and the risks it poses to the desiring heroine. While Isabella is made to assume the guilt for Carlo's death due to the machinations of Filippo, who tricks her into revealing her love for his son, in *Ottavia* the tragic action ensues from the heroine's fictitious betrayal of Nerone. If Alfieri depicts Filippo's tyranny as inexorable and the tyrant himself as omnipotent, with Isabella's unwitting admission of her love for Carlo acting simply as a pretense for his premeditated murder of his son in his unremitting lust for dominion, the tragedian does not depict Nerone's tyranny as animated by a similarly enigmatic source. Instead, Nerone's tyranny is motivated in large part by his passion for Poppea, to which the presence of Ottavia acts as an obstacle. Consequently, the nature of Nerone's tyranny is domestic when directed at Ottavia, and the political motives for his abuse of the heroine are generally, if not entirely, subordinated to the more private motivation stemming from his infatuation with his mistress.

Ottavia's late entry in the tragedy is in service to the plot and facilitates the concoction of Tigellino's lie, which will set the stage for Nerone's subsequent mistreatment of the heroine upon her return to Rome from exile. But this late entry also provides Alfieri with more time to explore her vulnerability within the tragedy through the calumny of the prefect, who expounds on the particularly ignominious nature of her infidelity:

A te narrarli
 Niun uomo ardi; ma, da tacersi sono,
 Or che da te repudiata a dritto,
 Più consorte non t'è? Stavasi in corte

L'indegna ancora; e dividea pur teco
 Talamo, e soglio; e si usurpava ancora
 Gli omaggi a donna imperial dovuti;
 Quando già in cor fatta ella s'era vile
 Più d'ogni vil rea femmina; quand'era
 Già entrato in suo pensiero e il nobil sangue,
 E il suo onore, e se stessa, e i suoi regj avi
 Ch'ella adocchiando andava...

(II, 3, vv. 141-153)⁶²

Uninterested for both aesthetic and political reasons in depicting sentimental scenes of love typical of French tragedy, Alfieri rarely portrays the amorous desire of his heroines as reciprocated; or, if it is reciprocated, the tragedy places it in opposition to the parallel political or familial concerns either of the hero, object of the heroine's desire, or of the desiring heroine herself. Like other desiring Alfierian heroines, Ottavia is punished for the love she bears. If Filippo drives Isabella to suicide not out of amorous jealousy but, rather, from a more inscrutable jealousy centered on power, he nonetheless takes Isabella's affections for Carlo as an affront that demands retribution. As for Ottavia, she is rewarded for her fidelity to Nerone with exile, insults, slander, and the constant sight of his mistress who is paraded before her.⁶³ Indeed, when she first appears in Act II, scene 6, Nerone calls her a "sterile pianta" (v. 213) and reminds her that her exile was due in large measure to her inability to bear children. In his tragic theater, Alfieri does not generally make his desiring heroines mothers, with Clitennestra being the most notable exception.⁶⁴ These

⁶² Suffused in Tigellino's virulently misogynistic account of Ottavia's alleged liaison with her musician are perhaps Alfieri's own reminiscences of his lover Penelope Pitt's confession of having had relations with a jockey. For the infamous episode and the tragedian's indignant reaction, see Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, vol. 1, ed. Luigi Fassò (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1951), 118-123.

⁶³ As will be seen, Clitennestra and Rosmunda are punished for their infidelity by being made to confront the blatant indifference of their lovers.

⁶⁴ Commenting on Plato's depiction of female love in the *Symposium*, Kristeva writes that Diotima's love is all the more feminine for its being based on procreation: "It is also more feminine to base love less on pleasure than on procreation or creation, at any rate on the production of bodies or works aiming for immortality" (Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 72). Alfieri makes a neat distinction between maternal and carnal

heroines, if married, often never perform this uxorial function; instead, the women through whom he explores the tragic constraints of motherhood tend to be widows or otherwise deprived of their husbands (e.g. through murder, as in Clitennestra's case). Alfieri's division of his heroines into mothers and desiring subjects illustrates the preference of his theater for an intense, psychological elaboration of tragic sentiment from which competing affections, e.g. a desiring heroine's concern for her offspring or a mother's love for her spouse, are distilled, albeit imperfectly in some instances. The distinction Alfieri makes between tragic mothers and tragic desiring heroines evinces, too, his anxiety with respect to the representational limits encountered in crafting his female characters, as indicated by his dissatisfaction, expressed in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, with Clitennestra's fractured identity as both mother and adulterous wife.⁶⁵ Although he adheres closely to Tacitus in portraying Ottavia as a barren wife,⁶⁶ the lack of offspring on the part of most desiring heroines within Alfierian theater becomes a sign of a certain lack of power within the tragic action, as well as seals their exclusion from the political sphere over which any progeny might have permitted them some influence.

It is entirely within the domestic sphere that Ottavia's tragedy unfolds. During her first audience with Nerone, after his condemnation of her sterility, she reminds him of her strict obedience to his will, asking: "Altro che pianto, / E riverenza, e silenzio, e sospiri, / Forse da me

love in his tragedies; only in Clitennestra is there a contamination of the two, with the resulting psychic divisions constituting her tragedy.

⁶⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101. "Clitennestra pure riesce un carattere difficilissimo a ben farsi in questa tragedia [*Agamennone*], dovendo ella esservi *Or moglie or madre; e non mai moglie o madre*" (Alfieri, 101).

⁶⁶ The inspiration for *Ottavia* derived largely from Alfieri's reading of Tacitus' account of Nero's murder of Octavia in the *Annals*. See Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 221-222. On Alfieri's departure from Tacitus in his own tragedy, see Paola Trivero, *Percorsi alfieriani* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2014), 63-73.

s'udia giammai?" (II, 3, vv. 223-225). As has been noted,⁶⁷ Ottavia is not a mere dupe in the tragedy, blind, as was Isabella initially, to the extent of the tyrant's malice. Instead, she is entirely cognizant of Nerone's capacity for cruelty and thus does not come into any knowledge previously unknown to her, unlike Isabella. She therefore both fully recognizes her own status as victim and perceives the mechanisms of Nerone's tyranny:

Ah! ben vegg'io, (me misera!) che abborri
 Me più assai, che marito odiar non possa
 Steril consorte. Oh me infelice donna!
 Più ognor ti offesi quant'io più ti amai.
 Ma, che ti chiesi? e che ti chieggo? oscura
 Solinga vita, e libertà del pianto.

(II, 3, vv. 235-240)⁶⁸

If Alfierian tragedy conceives of tyranny as irrational, as an abuse of power whose animating forces are ultimately unfathomable, Ottavia, then, is capable of apprehending the irrationality of Nerone's cruelty despite being unable to overcome her own love for him. It is this central paradox to which she resigns herself: notwithstanding her knowledge of Nerone's iniquity, she does not resist her desire for him, thus reversing the trajectory taken in *Filippo* by Isabella, whose discovery of the tyrant's crimes permits her to recognize her own passivity and drives her to action through

⁶⁷ See Fiore, *The Heroic Female*, 97-98. Fiore writes that "throughout *Ottavia*, this heroine displays remarkable insight into the reality that assaults her" (98). See also Trivero, *Percorsi alfieriani*, 73; and Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 95-96. Cf. Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 69. Raffaello Ramat states that Ottavia remains "dolcemente folle nella fedeltà amorosa al tiranno che l'odia e l'uccide" (Ramat, 69).

⁶⁸ Ottavia not only understands the mechanisms of Nerone's tyranny but perceives the factors motivating Poppea's love for the emperor. In Act II, scene 6, she declares:

Poppea
 Prezzar sa il trono, a cui non nacque: io seppi
 Apprezzar te: nè al paragon si attenti
 Meco venirne ella in amarti. Ottiene
 Ella il tuo cor; ma il merto io sola.

(vv. 260-264)

her defiant suicide. Believing that Nerone has summoned her merely to make her Poppea's handmaiden, Ottavia, on the other hand, does not protest the tyrant's attempt to debase her; she gives herself up as a willing victim in order to appease him out of love for him.⁶⁹ But when Nerone suggests that she is incapable of loving him,⁷⁰ she corrects him: "Ch'io nol dovrei, di' meglio: / Ma dal tuo cor non giudicare del mio" (II, 3, vv. 265-266). Her words reveal both her appreciation of the moral equivocality of her love for Nerone and the superiority of the knowledge which she possesses, since she can discern the workings of his tyranny and the related influence of Poppea, while her own private sentiments and personal motivation both remain unknown to the tyrant.

Ottavia's forbearance, however, is put to the test when Nerone, on the basis of Tigellino's lie, accuses her of taking as her lover her musician Eucero. The accusation posits the question of female virtue and propriety as a central consideration of the tragedy, but this question is nonetheless complicated by Ottavia's repeated insistence throughout the ensuing tragic action on not only her fidelity to Nerone but, more importantly, on her undiminished love for him. While in *Filippo* the tyrant's accusation of adultery occurs in the final act and coincides with Isabella's vindication of a measure of selfhood as she admits her love for Carlo in full defiance of Filippo, Nerone's own accusation, leveled at Ottavia in the second act, confirms, instead, the heroine's vulnerability and her powerlessness to effectively dispute the charge. Her response to Nerone's accusation is a commentary on her own insecurity as a woman within the imbalance of power constructed by the tragedy:

⁶⁹ "Eccomi dunque ai cenni
Del mio signor: che degg'io fare? imponi. —
Ma in tua corte neppur misera appieno
Farmi tu puoi, se col mio mal ti appago."

(II, 3, vv. 249-252)

⁷⁰ "Amarmi, / No, tu non puoi" (II, 3, vv. 264-265).

Misera me!... Che più mi avanza? In bando
 Dal talamo, dal trono, dalla reggia,
 Dalla patria; non basta?... Oh cielo! Intera
 Mia fama sola rimaneami; sola
 Mi ristorava d'ogni tolto bene

(II, 6, vv. 287-291)

The loss of her reputation prompts her desire for death. When next questioning Nerone as to his delay in killing her after he has already besmirched her good name, she employs the verb “trucidar,” whose connotative violence suggests the severity of the tyrant’s accusation and its fatal consequences for the “debole donna inerme”: “I mezzi / Di trucidar debole donna inerme / Mancar ti ponno?” (II, 6, vv. 297-299). Her perception of her own lack of agency, her “intima debolezza” in the words of Mario Fubini,⁷¹ are never in doubt.

Despite Cesarotti’s remark that Ottavia is “né cristiana, né moglie”⁷² and, therefore, not bound by conjugal dictate to remain devoted to Nerone, *Ottavia* arguably appears to be a commentary on marriage and on its close affinity with tyranny. In his personal correspondence, Alfieri repeatedly expresses his negative opinion of marriage,⁷³ congratulating in one letter his

⁷¹ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 228.

⁷² Cesarotti, “Lettera dell’abate Cesarotti,” in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 251.

⁷³ Alfieri notably expresses his unfavorable view of marriage in a letter to his mother, dated 11 September 1787. Later referring to this episode in the *Vita*, he writes ironically that while his mother playing matchmaker could not have chosen a “donna più seducente, che una nobilissima ragazza di 16 anni, ricca, e costumata,” he nevertheless abhors “tutti i legami che non si possono sciogliere,” in *Epistolario*, ed. Lanfranco Caretti, vol. 1 (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1963), 367. In his reaction to this proposal of marriage between him and a local noblewoman, Alfieri adds that his profession as tragedian precluded him from marrying: “Ma le fo riflettere, ch’io sto per aver 39 anni, che potrei essere piuttosto padre, che marito di una di 16; che io sono dato ad occupazioni affetto contrarie a quello stato; che non ci ho mai avuto vocazione” (Alfieri, 367). Economic reasons, too, required that he never married, given that he had earlier bequeathed his inheritance to his sister, Giulia, and her heirs in exchange for an annual pension. Lastly, in this same letter to his mother, he insists that there exists a certain undesirable element of disproportionality between him and the young woman in question: “E aggiunga, che se mai ci potessi pensare, non piglierei mai donna ricca, nè più giovine di me, se non al più di 10 anni, perchè nessuna felicità mai può essere nelle disproporzioni” (Alfieri, 368). This anxiety over disproportionality filters into Alfieri’s depiction of tragic amorous desire, characterized, in many cases, by excess, irrationality, and violence.

friend Mario Bianchi for having escaped the marital snare, or “lacci matrimoniali.”⁷⁴ Alfieri himself notably resisted marriage throughout his life, preferring, after a series of often tempestuous relationships with married women, companionship with Louise Stolberg, Countess of Albany. In the *Vita*, he depicts the countess’s husband, Charles Edward Stuart, the Jacobite pretender to the British throne, as a brute and tyrant and their marriage as a tyranny from which he seeks to rescue the countess.⁷⁵ In his tragedies and other writings, Alfieri largely conceives of marriage as an imposition on one’s personal freedom; the indissoluble bonds it establishes have the potential to become a tyrannical burden.

Having repudiated Ottavia from the outset of the tragedy, Nerone withholds from arranging her death and his subsequent remarriage to Poppea only out of fear of driving the discontented Roman populace to open rebellion. In the confrontations it sets up between the heroine and tyrant, the tragedy is animated by the domestic tyranny not dissimilar to the tyranny Alfieri identifies in the institution of marriage. In other words, the tragic action unfolds within an ostensibly political

⁷⁴ Alfieri, 393. In this letter, dated 23 February 1788, Alfieri congratulates his close friend on his “buona nuova,” that is, his intention to remain unmarried: “Nell’altra sua lettera ella mi dà una buona nuova, che ella spera di sfuggire i lacci matrimoniali: me ne rallegro con lei, e tenga forte così: lasci far razza a chi è nato da ciò” (Alfieri, 393). In this letter, Alfieri also makes mention of the recent death of the Countess of Albany’s husband, Charles Edward Stewart, whom he considered tyrannical. It is important to note that the tragedian’s sympathies did not lie only with men who rejected the constraints imposed by marriage; in a letter dated 15 August 1784, he comments with sensitivity on the uncertainty surrounding the intended marriage between his niece, Eleonora Luisa, and the marquess Onorato Ferreri de Gubernatis di Ventimiglia: “È una gran cosa per le povere ragazze quella terribil incertezza del loro destino” (Alfieri, 186).

⁷⁵ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 222. “La Donna mia (come più volte accennai) vivevasi angustiatissima; e tanto poi crebbero quei dispiaceri domestici, e le continue vessazioni del marito si terminarono finalmente in una sì violenta scena baccanale nella notte di Sant’Andrea, ch’ella per non soccombere sotto sì orribili trattamenti fu alla per fine costretta di cercare un modo per sottrarsi a sì fatta tirannia, e salvare la salute e la vita. Ed ecco allora, che io di bel nuovo dovei (contro la natura mia) raggirare presso i potenti di quel governo, per indurli a favorire la liberazione di quell’innocente vittima da un giogo sì barbaro e indegno” (Alfieri, 222).

frame, i.e. Nerone's efforts to mollify the plebeians and supporters of Ottavia and thus shore up his rule; but Ottavia's and Nerone's dichotomous sentiments are the tragedy's main interest. Furthermore, the characters' emotional conflict disregards the question of fate, which is a contested feature of other Alfierian tragedies and otherwise perceivable in the inexorable hatred exhibited by Filippo. Despite its borrowings from Tacitus' account of Nero's rule in the *Annals*, *Ottavia* is a thoroughly domestic affair; its tragic conflict plays out at the intimate intersection between rationality and irrationality, between self-knowledge and the unfathomable and irrepressible amorous desire that such self-knowledge does not preclude. It is Ottavia who embodies for Alfieri these ultimately irresolvable contradictions.

In Act III, the tragedy further concentrates its focus on the heroine's persistent love for Nerone notwithstanding his abuse and false accusation of infidelity. In fact, as she admits to Seneca whose sympathies lie with her, the pain from Nerone's false accusation is surpassed by the pain derived from seeing him bestow his affections on Poppea.⁷⁶ The depiction of Poppea in the tragedy as Nerone's spiteful, self-serving, and power-hungry mistress has led her to be viewed as too crude and obvious a foil for the virtuous Ottavia.⁷⁷ But while in the *Parere sulle tragedie* Alfieri himself expresses dissatisfaction with his portrayal of Poppea, whom he intended to mirror Nerone's iniquity,⁷⁸ her prominence within the tragic action spotlights the aberrant quality of Ottavia's amorous desire for the tyrant, its excessiveness, and its capacity to veer the heroine toward the

⁷⁶ "Per me il vederlo d'altra donna amante / È il rio dolor, che ogni dolor sorpassa" (III, 1, vv. 33-34).

⁷⁷ Ines Ceccoli, *L'eroina alfieriana* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1926), 116.

⁷⁸ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 117. "Poppea, degna dell'amor di Nerone, non credo si dovesse fare altrimenti; ma, su questo modello ammesso, ella si potea forse meglio eseguire" (Alfieri, 117).

villainy of Poppea herself.⁷⁹ Despite the ostensible purity of her love for Nerone, which she herself asserts throughout the tragedy, in her rivalry with Poppea, Ottavia's virtues are not positioned in diametric opposition to the mistress's turpitude but, rather, uncomfortably implicated by it. If in *Filippo* Isabella overcomes her guilt for her passion for Carlo through her recognition of the tyrant's baseness, Ottavia, on the other hand, not only bears but accepts the shame of her own passion for Nerone, as she confesses:

Crudel Neron, qual che tu sii, nè posso
 Cessar d'amarti, nè arrossirme: immensa
 Ben m'è vergogna in ver, rival nomarmi
 Di Poppea

(III, 6, vv. 252-255)

In Alfierian tragedy, as evidenced most clearly by Mirra, but also by other heroines such as Antigone and Giocasta, there rarely exist clear demarcations of virtue and heroism, of tyranny and villainy; instead, Alfierian heroines often navigate the boundary between heroism and villainy and, in so doing, demonstrate the nebulosity of these two categories. While Ottavia reacts in indignation at the charge of a liaison with a lowly musician, rightly perceiving it as an attempt not only to justify Nerone's abuse but, so too, to debase her in the eyes of the Roman people,⁸⁰ the

⁷⁹ Although Alfieri remained unconvinced of the tragic effectiveness of Poppea's character, she is perhaps a more complex character than he himself recognized in the *Parere sulle tragedie*. Poppea's love for Nerone is portrayed as a shield for her political ambitions; but in her fear that Nerone might be swayed by the people's hatred of her to repudiate her as he earlier did Ottavia, she exhibits a vulnerability that links her to the woman whom she supplanted. Alfieri explores Poppea's doubts in Act IV, from which Ottavia is absent. When the two women do appear together, the tragedian treats Poppea as an extension of Nerone's cruelty and contrasts her with Ottavia's virtuousness. But in the jealousy that Poppea provokes in the heroine, Alfieri leaves open the possibility for a latent affinity between the two.

⁸⁰ In Act III, scene 1, Ottavia comments on Nerone's false accusation and on the sordidness of the court, which lends it credibility:

Ma, giovin, donna, infra corrotta corte
 Cresciuta, oh cielo! esser tenuta io posso
 Rea di sozzo delitto. Altri non crede,
 Nè creder de', ch'io per Neron tuttora

tragedy is nonetheless motivated by its preoccupation with the unavoidably sordid element found in its heroine's desire for the tyrant. A symptom of this preoccupation is Ottavia's own sense of shame over her love for Nerone.

Ottavia's amorous desire, which she does not resist as Mirra, Antigone, or even Sofonisba attempt to do, suggests, then, a certain allegiance with the tyrant within the tragic proceedings. Morally opposed to Nerone's crimes and abuse of power, she nevertheless accepts his mistreatment, concerns herself with his safety, menaced by the people's murmurs of rebellion, and in most ways bends to his will.⁸¹ In aligning herself in this manner with Nerone, she denies herself a certain measure of agency and risks becoming a passive entity within the tragic action, a sort of guidepost meant to direct Nerone toward the fulfillment of his own ambitions.⁸² In fact, still in Act III, she agrees to placate the discontented crowds by showing herself "in placida sembianza" (3, v. 168) before them so as to trick them into believing her returned to Nerone's good graces. However, in her insistence that she can calm the growing turmoil provided that "io mi finga tua" (III, 3, v. 170), Ottavia hints at a way to fulfill her desire, even if under false pretenses, through her apparent passivity. This brief slippage between reality and wish fulfillment also perhaps prefigures the scene in which Mirra pleads with Ciniro to be severe with her after the interrupted

Amor conservi

(vv. 27-31)

⁸¹ "Io sacro / Il suo voler tenea" (III, 1, vv. 64-65), Ottavia declares at one point to Seneca, in the same breath recalling the brother whom Nerone murdered and for whose death she forgave him.

⁸² De Lauretis would perhaps argue that through Ottavia's passivity the tragedy threatens to fulfill for Nerone the promise of his "social contract, *his* biological and affective destiny," or what, in other words, is his entry into self-knowledge and self-realization at the expense of the woman, Ottavia herself, who now merely exists to serve a plot function (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 133).

nuptials with Peréo.⁸³ In his otherwise virtuous heroines, Alfieri demonstrates how the dangerous underbelly of female amorous desire can only be exposed through double entendres or in unfulfilled fantasies.

Yet while Ottavia accedes to Nerone's will, presenting herself as a passive political tool to be employed in service of the tyrant's objectives,⁸⁴ the tragedy keeps its focus directed, albeit anxiously, on its atypical heroine.⁸⁵ However, this focus is, as previously seen, inconstant: making an entry only late in Act II, Ottavia does not appear at all in the fourth act, although she is the topic of discussion of the other characters who seek a way to rid themselves of her without driving the people to riot. Thus her temporary disappearance from the tragedy does briefly shift the work's attention onto Nerone and his efforts to secure her death in order to satisfy his passion for Poppea. Ottavia's disappearance, moreover, is further evidence of her passivity within the tragic action, since she has already sanctioned Nerone's ill treatment of her and denounced the people's threat of sedition in her name. But while it is her perceived influence over the Roman populace which stirs him to fear her and proceed with caution in his search for justifiable grounds on which to ordain her death, it is merely the idea of the heroine which augments Nerone's timor. This idea does not always necessitate the presence of Ottavia herself within the tragedy and imbues her with

⁸³ In Act IV, scene 5 of *Mirra*, the titular heroine pleads with Ciniro to punish her, ostensibly for the interrupted nuptials but secretly for her illicit desire for her father: "È ver: Ciniro meco / Inesorabil sia; null'altro io bramo; / Null'altro io voglio" (vv. 217-219).

⁸⁴ At one point Ottavia even says: "Ah! mille / Morti vogl'io, non ch'una, anzi che danno / Lieve arrecare al signor mio" (III, 3, vv. 153-155).

⁸⁵ Ottavia's amorous desire for Nerone parallels, to a certain extent, *Mirra's* for her father and *Phèdre's* for her stepson in Racine's tragedy. All three tragic heroines love beyond reason, and the objects of their desire are either forbidden, as in the case of *Mirra* and *Phèdre*, or unjustifiable, as in the case of *Ottavia*. But while both *Mirra* and *Phèdre* attempt to resist their amorous desire, actively striving to thwart it, *Ottavia* becomes a passive agent of hers and does not reject her passion for Nerone despite the attendant shame she feels. It is this passivity which renders *Ottavia* a less stable presence within her tragedy. If the heroine's psychological struggle to resist her amorous desire is, arguably, the main focus of both *Mirra* and *Phèdre*, there is no similar struggle to motivate the tragic action and keep it concentrated on the heroine in *Ottavia*.

more power political than she actually wields in the tragic proceedings.⁸⁶ The heroine's simultaneous presence and non-presence in the tragedy has been recognized by Mario Fubini, who charges the work with exhibiting a certain degree of incoherence and fragmentation because caught between two antagonistic poles of desire, i.e. Ottavia's for Nerone, Nerone's for Poppea and power.⁸⁷ However, Ottavia's appearance in only three of the tragedy's five acts likely speaks, additionally, to Alfieri's own difficulty in representing the heroine's complex and morally questionable amorous desire, not least of all because such a desire, which calls for her submission to Nerone, demands that Ottavia rarely intervene in the tragic action.

The final act opens with Ottavia's own admission of her passivity within the tragic action. Yet it is the shift from passivity to activity which the tragedy will attempt to effect at its close. Alone, and awaiting the death which she understands is inevitable due to its being on Nerone's order, Ottavia says: "Qui deggio / Aspettar la mia sorte; il signor mio / Così l'impone" (V, 1, vv. 3-5). The arrival of Seneca in the following scene instills her with a measure of hope when he relates to her the torture endured by her handmaidens; inspired by her "tante virtù" (V, 2, v. 30), they have all denied her "supposto fallo" (V, 2, v. 34). Additionally, the Roman people have seen through Tigellino's attempt to slander Ottavia through the false accusation of a liaison with Eucero,

⁸⁶ Ottavia, however, is aware of the political sway she potentially holds over the Roman populace. This is demonstrated in her suggestion that she show herself before the people in order to calm them in Act III, scene 3. Her passivity is, therefore, a deliberate choice on her part and, for Alfieri, difficult to represent tragically.

⁸⁷ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 224, 232. Fubini writes that the tragedy's sense of incoherence "non è vizio del singolo personaggio, ma della tragedia tutta: quell'amore, che dovrebbe avvicinare queste figure così diverse e contribuire a creare l'atmosfera in cui devono muoversi i personaggi di una medesima tragedia, rimane un dato astratto e non trova espressioni conformi alla condizione singolarissima dei due personaggi [Nerone and Ottavia]" (Fubini, 224). Rereading this incoherence through Kristeva's understanding of desire as lack, however, transforms it into a source of tragic tension through which Alfieri highlights the irrationality of Ottavia's desire. She desires Nerone, who rejects her in his passion for Poppea. The tyrant's desire for Poppea and imperial power, which Fubini views as disconnected from the heroine's own love, increases Ottavia's isolation within the tragic action as well as the contrast between amorous desire and shame with which she contends. See Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 155.

and now openly praise her virtuousness. However, Tigellino's sudden appearance in the subsequent scene brings with it a new accusation: Ottavia's seduction of Aniceto, the prefect of Nerone's fleet and whom the emperor had employed, before the events of the tragedy, to murder Agrippina, his scheming and politically dangerous mother. In his effort to turn the people's affections away from Ottavia, Nerone charges her with seducing Aniceto for political gain, and demands that she acknowledge her treason before the Roman populace. But Ottavia shows the first sign of resistance to the tyrant's will, stating to Tigellino that she will confess her guilt to Nerone and Poppea alone: "Narrar vo' solo ad essi / I miei tanti delitti: altro non chieggo" (V, 2, vv. 97-98). After Tigellino's departure, she declares her intention to Seneca, admitting that she seeks to die before their eyes.⁸⁸

If for Teresa de Lauretis narrative is motivated by desire, a desire to advance the plot over the bodies of women who are made to act as stepping stones on the hero's path to self-knowledge,⁸⁹ Ottavia, then, in her final moments, tries to arrest the narrative in which she has been caught up as a passive victim. As a tragedy, *Ottavia* concerns itself with the malignant forces of rumor, scandal, infamy, and calumny, demonstrating their negative consequences for the heroine whose most effective resistance proves her death. Her desire to "narrar" becomes, therefore, synonymous with "morir," since she seeks to engineer her death, inevitable though it may be, as autonomously as

⁸⁸ "Morir; sugli occhi loro" (V, 4, v. 101).

⁸⁹ See de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, particularly pages 103-136 of the chapter "Desire in Narrative." Interestingly, within *Ottavia*, it is Seneca who, inspired by Ottavia's example, renounces his former fealty to Nerone and prepares himself for a hero's suicide at the conclusion of the tragedy. His character perhaps undergoes the greatest transformation within the tragic action, as the tragedy opens with the philosopher still in service to Nerone and ends with intimations of his suicide in defiance of his tyranny. Cf. Vincenza Perdichizzi, "Le tragedie senecane e i modelli francesi," in *Testi e avantesti alfieriani* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2018), 67-75. Perdichizzi argues, instead, that in the tragedy Alfieri fails to overcome his disdain for Seneca, whose merits as a writer and philosopher are called into question by his employment at the court of the tyrannical Nerone (Perdichizzi, 74).

possible. Although in Alfierian tragedy, it is typical for heroes and heroines alike to commit suicide by stabbing themselves, Ottavia, instead, requests that Seneca give her his ring, which she knows to contain poison. She argues that were she to snatch Nerone's dagger and end her life through that means (the method adopted by Isabella in her own suicide in *Filippo*), the tyrant would simply craft another narrative, accusing her of attempting to assassinate him.⁹⁰ When Seneca shows his reluctance to satisfy her request, she contrives to get hold of the ring, a gesture which Cesarotti believed not to be entirely verisimilar.⁹¹ While Alfieri argues the necessity of the gesture on the basis of its demonstrating her desperation,⁹² the heroine's act of taking the poisoned ring indicates, as do the similar actions undertaken by Isabella and Mirra, for example, in their respective tragedies,⁹³ how death becomes for multiple Alfierian heroines the intersection of activity and passivity, the point at which the inevitability of the heroine's death is slightly offset, or, in other

⁹⁰ Ottavia explains to Seneca:

La mia destra forse
Mal servirammi: io ne farò pur l'atto.
Di aver tentato di trafigger lui,
Mi accuserà Nerone.

(V, 4, vv. 175-179)

⁹¹ Cesarotti, "Lettera dell'abate Cesarotti," in Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 252. "Insigne è la scena del V atto, ove Ottavia implora il soccorso di Seneca, per liberarsi colla morte delle persecuzioni del suo nemico. Ella mostra una fermezza tranquilla, e bellissime sono le ragioni per indur Seneca a darle l'anello venefico. Seneca forse avrebbe potuto persuadersene; ma vediamo che la sua filosofia non giunge a tanto: egli vorrebbe a tutto costo salvar Ottavia. Come dunque è verisimile, che si lasci rapire l'anello? Sia sorpresa, sia forza, il fatto non par naturale" (Cesarotti, 252).

⁹² Alfieri, "Note dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 262-263. Alfieri further justifies having Ottavia covertly take Seneca's ring by arguing that the heroine is able to make out with the gem during a moment of hesitation on the part of the philosopher: torn between his dismay at Ottavia's firm resolve and grim satisfaction that such an end spares her Nerone's brutality, a distracted Seneca allows the ring to be taken from him.

⁹³ Isabella, as previously seen, avails herself of Filippo's dagger in her suicide, while Mirra, in a very psychoanalytically suggestive move, kills herself with the dagger snatched from her father.

words, resisted, by its transformation into a willing suicide; this transformation is revealed in the heroine's act of snatching physically, and always from a male character, the weapon of her death which would have otherwise been denied her.

Brought before Nerone and his mistress, and having already consumed the poison that will take her life, Ottavia alludes to her suicidal act: "Nerone, appien già sei scolpato; godi. / Già d'esser stata tua, d'averti amato, / Data men son debita pena io stessa" (V, 5, vv. 202-204). Her words provoke Nerone's consternation and fury as he realizes that he has been cheated out of executing her on his own terms and thus of using her death as a political symbol. With her suicide, the heroine exhibits, once more, personal insight into the nature of her guilt within the tragedy. Through the act of taking her own life, she not only exerts an agency underutilized up until this point, depriving Nerone of the satisfaction of transforming her end into a political spectacle; additionally, she, as she admits, punishes herself by self-inflicting a "pena" for an amorous desire that is, inarguably and knowingly, a source of shame but otherwise irrepressible.

Amorous desire is the constitutive element of Ottavia's final words in the tragedy. If in her suicide she claims for herself an agency heretofore unknown to her, this agency is undermined by her ascription of murder to Nerone, whom, she argues, has not killed her with any physical venom, but, instead, has poisoned her by forcing her to bear witness to his love for Poppea.⁹⁴ Her last utterances speak implicitly to the strength of her love for Nerone, which permits her to forgive him for his crimes:

Ma, ti perdono io tutto; a me perdona,
 (Sol mio delitto) se il piacer ti tolgo,
 Coll'affrettare il mio morir poch'ore,
 D'una intera vendetta. Io ben potea
 Tutto, o Neron, tranne il mio onor, donarti;
 Per te soffrir, tranne l'infamia, tutto....

⁹⁴ "Eri men crudo assai / Nell'uccidermi allor, che in darti a donna, / Che amarti mai, volendo, nol sapria" (V, 5, vv. 232-234).

Niun danno a te fia per tornarne, io spero,...
 Dal.... mio.... morire. Il trono è tuo: tu il godi:
 Abbiti pace.... Intorno al sanguinoso
 Tuo letto.... io giuro.... Di non mai... venirne
 Ombra dolente.... a disturbar.... tuoi.... sonni....
 Conoscerai frattanto un dì costei. —

(V, 5, vv. 235-246)

This final speech is a deliberate and impassioned resignation to Nerone's tyranny; Ottavia even begs forgiveness for denying the tyrant the pleasure of killing her according to his scheme. Her speech also makes manifest the violence, in large measure masochistic, which underlies her passion for Nerone, as she reveals herself willing to have suffered every nature of abuse except the loss of her reputation. Although her suicide strongly suggests a degree of agency, in her death, Ottavia accepts once more a passive role; she assures Nerone that she will not haunt him from the beyond. The same cannot be said for Poppea once she inevitably loses the emperor's affections and meets a similar grisly end; as the heroine has argued throughout the tragedy, the mistress's love for Nerone is self-serving rather than genuine. If Ottavia refuses to haunt Nerone after her death, Poppea's ghost will no doubt torment him.

The intimations of violence that the tragedy proposes in Ottavia's willingness to have endured Nerone's persecution on the grounds of her love for him, are echoed in an intriguing parallel consideration with which the tragic work has been preoccupied from the very beginning. This parallel, on which this analysis has already attempted to elaborate, corresponds to the conclusions Franco Ferrucci draws in his examination of Alfierian tragic theater's revealing affinity for its tyrants. Despite Ferrucci's argument taking as its primary focus Mirra, in whose unutterable passion for her father lies both Alfieri's tacit sympathy for the figure of the tyrant and

his consequent sense of guilt,⁹⁵ Ottavia reveals herself to be another heroine through whom the tragedian teases out the interrelationship between amorous desire and tyranny. Cesarotti, as already seen, criticizes Ottavia's love for Nerone, which renders her intolerably passive and suggests a certain and unjustifiable allegiance to his tyranny within the tragic action. In defense of his heroine, Alfieri writes that the tragedy's main interest lies in the psychic contrast between what Ottavia feels and what she knows she should not, since:

la compassione umana sempre più si muove per gl'infelici, che hanno in sé debolezza e timore, come conviensi a donna, che per quelli che son forti contro l'avversità, e risoluti a pigliar generoso partito: questi si ammirano; ma degli altri si piange.⁹⁶

Alfieri therefore acknowledges that the tragic interest derives from Ottavia's imperfection of character, that is, from her unremitting amorous desire for Nerone. In the dichotomy he sets up between heroes who generate spectators' admiration and those who, instead, generate their tears, *Ottavia* with its imperfect heroine illustrates the distance that separates Alfierian tragic theater from the Italian tragedies appearing earlier in the century, which sought to transform their heroes into inspirational models of virtue, as Alviera Bussotti has argued.⁹⁷

As Paola Trivero points out, Alfieri reads the story of Ottavia, taken from Tacitus, through the optics of desire, enriching his borrowings from the Latin historian with the addition of the

⁹⁵ Franco Ferrucci, "Il silenzio di Mirra," in *Addio al Parnaso* (Milan: Bompiani, 1971), 48. Ferrucci poses a provocative question: "Per proteggere l'inconscio gioco di Alfieri il tiranno amato dev'essere buono, come possibile amarne uno cattivo?" (Ferrucci, 48). The tyrant whom Ferrucci has in mind is Ciniro, Mirra's ostensibly benevolent father. However, the question proves a critical one when situated within the economy of *Ottavia*, given the heroine's professed love for the openly heinous Nerone.

⁹⁶ Alfieri, "Note dell'Alfieri," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 262-263.

⁹⁷ See Alviera Bussotti, "*Belle e savie*": *Virtù e tragedia nel primo Settecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2018).

heroine's love for Nerone, a feature not found in Tacitus' account of the emperor.⁹⁸ Although he crafts a heroine whose passion necessitates her willing submission to tyranny, Alfieri does not render Ottavia entirely passive within the tragic action. In addition to denying Nerone the satisfaction of her public admission of guilt and subsequent execution, the heroine resists the tyrant in another way, i.e. through the very strength and sincerity of her amorous desire. This desire, which on the surface defies all credibility, repulses Nerone and sets the heroine in opposition to his will precisely in the same moment when it conforms her will to his. Moreover, it is through this amorous desire that she manages to conquer her timidity and realize her death with some measure of autonomy. Just prior to her suicide, she expresses to Seneca her fear of dying: "Per te, se il vuoi, fuggir poss'io di vita, / Ma, di aspettar la morte io non ho forza" (V, 4, vv. 149-150).⁹⁹ Driven by her love for Nerone, which fails to accept his infidelity and passion for another woman, she commits suicide, overcoming her dread. If Nerone's own timor is partially eliminated by the tragedy's end, it is merely through the expedient of Ottavia's death, not through any similar psychological struggle.

⁹⁸ Trivero, *Percorsi alfieriani*, 71.

⁹⁹ Ottavia also expresses her fear of dying in Act III, scene 1, but this dread is coupled with the *amor mortis* characteristic of Alfierian heroes and heroines:

...Nel rientrar in queste
Soglie, ho deposto ogni pensier di vita.
Non ch'io morir non tema; in me tal forza
Donde trarrei? La morte, è vero, io temo:
Eppur la bramo; e sospirato il guardo
A te, maestro del morire, io volgo.

(vv. 49-54)

Although Ottavia here addresses Seneca, the Stoic philosopher fails to teach the heroine how to die. Instead, as the tragedy implies, the heroine's death will embolden the "maestro del morire" to take his own life in a similarly noble suicide.

The heroine's suicide is another innovation brought by Alfieri to Tacitus' account of the repudiated empress; Tacitus writes, instead, that Octavia is murdered by Nero's henchmen and only dies once, after being placed in a steaming hot bath, her blood coagulated by her fear warms up enough to flow freely from her opened veins. Although passive as a result of her amorous desire for Nerone, Ottavia in Alfieri's tragedy nonetheless achieves a degree of agency through her suicide. Yet in the work's insistence on the heroine's "debolezza," or weakness, Alfieri proposes a linking of amorous desire and tyranny and strips love of the sentimentality he despised in French tragedies; in so doing, he presents a tragic amorous desire entirely differentiated from Isabella's desire for Carlo in *Filippo*. He also suggests a provocative link between Ottavia and the earlier Clitennestra, whose own amorous passion leads to her clear association with tyranny as well as foreshadows his later treatment of love in his depiction of the villainous Rosmunda.

With *Ottavia*, Alfieri creates a tragedy motivated by the deliberate passivity of its heroine and the guilt she is made to bear as a result of her aberrant love. In its uncomfortable abutment with tyranny, Ottavia's amorous desire is such that in remaining faithful to Nerone she is not exculpated within the tragic action but, instead, remains blameworthy. For Alfieri, this irony and the psychological complexity it imparts to Ottavia serve as the motor of the tragedy.

III.2. Love, Villainy, and Punishment

a. Clitennestra

The tragedies *Agamennone* and *Oreste* are a diptych of amorous desire and its fatal consequences. One of Alfieri's most complex heroines, Clitennestra in the first tragedy is seduced by Egisto and manipulated into slaying Agamennone; in the second, she is scorned by her lover, now her consort, and accidentally killed by Oreste, her son. In each tragedy, Alfieri portrays the heroine as tyrannized by her amorous desire; she is rendered villainous as a result of her passion for Egisto yet comes to be punished for her inability to renounce it. An ambivalent figure, she is both tyrannical and oppressed, resistant, in no small measure, to the excesses of Egisto's violence and yet largely obedient in her desire for him.

Clitennestra's tragedy unfolds within domestic parameters that diminish the classical subject matter's emphasis on societal disruption and inversion.¹⁰⁰ Alfieri, instead, concentrates his attention on Clitennestra's amorous desire, which he believed to be more tragic than the sacrifice of her daughter, Ifigenia, the main impetus for the heroine's murderous actions in ancient treatments of the myth.¹⁰¹ Because of the weight Alfieri gives to her passion for Egisto within the tragic action, this final analysis of Clitennestra plots the trajectory of her amorous desire in both *Agamennone* and *Oreste* and argues that amorous desire becomes one of the main keys in which to read and understand the structure imparted to the two tragedies. The trajectory taken by Clitennestra in pursuit of her amorous desire will be seen to interweave itself with the trajectories

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Hunting and Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 152.

¹⁰¹ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 97. "Quanto virtuosamente tragica e terribile riesce la precedente catastrofe, d'un padre che è sforzato di salvar la figlia uccidendola, altrettanto e più, viziosamente e orribilmente tragica è questa, di una moglie che uccide il marito per esser ella amante d'un altro" (Alfieri, 97).

taken by Egisto and Oreste in their own pursuit of vengeance. Rather than simply portray Clitennestra as a slave to passion, weak-minded and weak-willed, Alfieri demonstrates, as in *Filippo* and *Ottavia*, how the heroine's amorous desire becomes a means by which problems concerning female agency and passivity are posed and confronted within the tragic action. Instead of operating in strict obedience to the demands of the tragedies' male figures, Clitennestra clashes with both Egisto and Oreste throughout the tragic action.

Because infidelity, motivated by amorous desire, becomes the way in which Clitennestra attempts to negotiate the constrictions imposed on her by her marriage to Agamennone and acquire a subjectivity not kept in check by her conjugal bonds, both *Agamennone* and *Oreste* permit Alfieri to examine in more depth the means by which marriage, given the domestic setting of both tragedies and their disinterest in the sociopolitical implications of ancient tragic retellings of the myth, can be fashioned into suitably tragic material. Neither *Filippo* nor *Ottavia* situates its heroine within a tragic marriage to the degree seen in *Agamennone* and *Oreste*. In *Filippo*, Isabella's love for Carlo is largely ancillary to the tragedy's more direct focus on Filippo's inexorable cruelty; in *Ottavia*, the heroine does not act from within her marriage to Nerone, having already been repudiated before the tragedy begins. Instead, Clitennestra's tragedy in *Agamennone* plays out entirely within the confines of her untenable marriage; in *Oreste*, her tragedy concludes after her unhappy remarriage to Egisto. Enrico Mattioda argues that Alfieri refrained from excluding "del tutto la possibilità di inserire l'amore fra le passioni tragiche" as long as the love depicted was sublime and less "sdolcinato e galante" than what was typically portrayed on French stages.¹⁰² *Agamennone* and *Oreste*, which both predate *Ottavia* by some years, are the first of Alfieri's

¹⁰² Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento*, 63.

tragedies to privilege an exploration of amorous passion and the terrible toll it has the potential to wreak.

Clitennestra's tragic amorous desire becomes at once both an entry point into her complex psychology and grounds for her punishment within the tragic action as well as in a paratextual sense, since Alfieri condemns her for her passion in his commentary on his tragedies, in keeping with the reigning eighteenth-century moralistic perspective. But with her moral ambiguity, Clitennestra presages Alfieri's subsequent depiction of an irrational and villainous amorous desire in *Rosmunda*. *Agamennone* and *Oreste* precede this latter tragedy by several years, being conceived shortly after work had commenced on *Filippo* in 1776. The tragedies were subsequently put into prose in 1777, then versified in 1778.¹⁰³ However, in both works, Alfieri establishes coordinates that will later enable him to place *Rosmunda*, ruthless and implacable as a result of her passion for Almachilde, at the very center of the tragic action, albeit with a large measure of ambivalence similar to that found in the earlier representation of Clitennestra.

Alfieri encodes the tragic action of *Agamennone* in the language of desire; the plot turns on the axis of betrayal. Throughout the tragedy, characters enact or hypothesize different betrayals that substantiate Alfieri's interest in the polyvalent potential of "tradimento," a recurring term that emphasizes Clitennestra's adulterous love and anticipates the murder of her husband. The term, however, can also refer to the general unfulfillment of an oath, conjugal or otherwise. In *Agamennone*, Clitennestra's unfaithfulness to the eponymous king is brought into tension with Egisto's own quest to fulfill his oath to Tieste, his father, who was unknowingly made to eat his own slain children by Atréo, *Agamennone*'s father, whose wife Tieste had originally seduced. In

¹⁰³ Alfieri returned to both tragedies in 1781 ahead of printing ten tragic works between 1783-85 with the publisher Pazzini-Carli.

Oreste, Clitennestra will once again find herself in the crosshairs of a paternal oath as the eponymous hero works to avenge the murdered Agamennone. This parallel acceptation of the term “tradimento,” emphasized throughout the two tragedies, undergirds the intimate relationship Alfieri establishes between amorous betrayal and oath-breaking and the mechanism of desire at work in the tragic action.

In *Agamennone*, betrayals abound. Clitennestra, for example, hopes that Agamennone will be “betrayed” by fortune in his return from Troy: “E s’oggi / Al fin Fortuna lo tradisse” (I, 2, vv. 109-110). Elettra later rebukes her mother for comparing herself to her infamous sister Elena, who “tradia il marito” (I, 3, v. 258). After Agamennone’s reentry in Argo, Clitennestra fears inadvertently betraying her adulterous passion to her consort: “Ei m’è signor: tradito / Bench’io sol l’abbia in mio pensier, vederlo / Pur con l’occhio di prima, io no, nol posso” (II, 2, vv. 138-140).¹⁰⁴ This anxiety over her inability to conceal her illicit amorous desire from Agamennone is transformed over the course of the tragedy into a deep-rooted paranoia as she begins to suspect that Elettra has divulged her secret to the king: “Tradita io son: tu mi tradisti, Elettra. / Così tua fè mi serbi? / Al re svelasti Egisto” (III, 5, vv. 281-283).

The tragedy’s sequence of betrayals continues. In order to spur Clitennestra to mariticide, Egisto convinces her that Agamennone has taken as his mistress Cassandra, the Trojan princess

¹⁰⁴ As Simon Critchley writes in his analysis of Racine’s protagonist Phèdre: “Hers is a sin of the heart, not a sin of the flesh,” in “I Want to Die, I Hate My Life—Phaedra’s Malaise,” in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 177. As she herself admits, Clitennestra, like Phèdre, is unfaithful in thought rather than in deed; however, from this unconsummated desire result extreme mental anguish and an ineradicable guilt. But if Racine with Phèdre, as Critchley argues, dramatizes “the inner conflict that constitutes Christian subjectivity in Augustine’s *Confessions*” (Critchley, 177), Alfieri with Clitennestra does not represent the mind’s struggle to transcend its body’s tendency toward sinful pleasures of the flesh, so much as the futile effort to retain one’s reason in the face of an irrepressible passion. Where Racine’s is a question of tragic morality, Alfieri’s is more a question of tragic disproportion. This emphasis on disproportion can also be seen in the tragedian’s contempt for his creation, who trades in an Agamennone for a mere Egisto. See Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 98.

and now prisoner-of-war. This fictitious betrayal is meant to weaken her resolve. Finally, Agamennone's own last word in the tragic action is another notable return to the motif under examination. Fatally stabbed by Clitennestra while sleeping, he cries out: "Oh tradimento!... / Tu, sposa?... Oh cielo!... Io moro.... Oh tradimento!..." (V, 3, vv. 146-147). By embedding multiple betrayals within the tragic action, the tragedy repeatedly evokes Clitennestra's illicit amorous desire, reinforces its strength, and demonstrates its grip on a mind beset by ineradicable suspicion.

This constant return to the theme of betrayal also serves another purpose. The tragedy's numerous betrayals corroborate Clitennestra's vulnerability within the tragic plot and her susceptibility to Egisto's machinations. Whether true or the fictions produced by her paranoia, these betrayals confirm the excessive nature of her amorous desire and her inability to exert any lasting control over it. Alfieri comments on the disproportionate character of Clitennestra's desire in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, writing that the heroine has "ripiena il cuore d'una passione iniqua, ma smisurata."¹⁰⁵ Although he adds that Clitennestra's plight would be moving if eighteenth-century audiences could suspend their disbelief so as to be able to attribute her passion to the forces of destiny,¹⁰⁶ he subordinates destiny to human reason in his assessment of the heroine:

Ma chi giudicherà Clitennestra col semplice lume di natura, e colle facultà intellettuali e sensitive del cuore umano, sarà forse a dritto nauseato nel vedere una matrona, rimbambita per un suo pazzo amore, tradire il più gran re della Grecia, i suoi figli, e se stessa, per un Egisto.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 97.

¹⁰⁶ Alfieri, 98. "Clitennestra, ripiena il cuore d'una passione iniqua, ma smisurata, potrà forse in un certo aspetto commovere chi si presterà alquanto a quella favolosa forza del destin dei pagani, e alle orribili passioni quasi ispirate dai Numi nel cuore di tutti gli Atridi, in punizione dei delitti de' loro avi: che la teologia pagana così sempre compose i suoi Dei, punitori di delitti col farne commettere dei sempre più atroci" (Alfieri, 98).

¹⁰⁷ Alfieri, 98.

Rather than entirely derive from an adverse fate, Clitennestra's troubles are, instead, the result of her inability to exercise self-restraint, since it is the contest between the human will and an ultimately uncontrollable amorous desire in which Alfieri is primarily interested. Despite his negative evaluation of her in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, by sidelining destiny within the tragic action, the tragedian grants Clitennestra a degree of autonomy that gives her control over her own fate. It is precisely this agency which permits him to write that her betrayal of the "più gran re della Grecia, i suoi figli, e se stessa, per un Egisto" produces nausea rather than the sense of pity normally associated with the tragic genre. Alfieri therefore condemns Clitennestra for her lack of self-control, but this condemnation can also be seen as a liberation, if only partial, from the traditional forces of destiny which govern classical Greek tragedy.¹⁰⁸

Having given pride of place to the human capacity for irrationality within the tragic action, Alfieri depicts Clitennestra's amorous desire as relentless and all-consuming and against which she struggles, ultimately in vain. Echoes of this unremitting and desperate passion are found in the *Vita* in which Alfieri recounts his own affair with the married Gabriella Falletti di Villafalletto. Notwithstanding his lackluster appraisal of Clitennestra in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, there are unmistakable parallels between her desire for Egisto and the tragedian's own for the marchioness. Attributing to his unworthy passion for Gabriella Falletti a severe gastrointestinal distress, a forerunner of the nausea provoked by Clitennestra's lasciviousness, Alfieri writes: "La rabbia, la vergogna, e il dolore, in cui mi facea sempre vivere quell'indegno amore, mi aveano cagionata quella singolar malattia. Ed io, non vedendo strada per me di uscire di quel sozzo laberinto, sperai,

¹⁰⁸ See George Steiner's seminal evaluation of tragedy in *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). According to the critic's well-known thesis, the forces of fate retreated from tragedy following their last gasp in the works of Racine.

e desiderai di morirne.”¹⁰⁹ This same coupling of love and death reappears in Clitennestra’s words to Egisto in the opening scene of Act II:

Incontro a morte, anco ad infamia incontro,
 Io volontaria corro: al fero Atride
 Corro a svelar la impura fiamma io stessa,
 Ed a perdermi teco. Invan divisa
 Dalla tua sorte spero la mia sorte:
 Se fuggi, io fuggo; se perisci, io pero.

(vv. 66-71)

In her passion for Egisto, Clitennestra desires to fuse her fate with that of her lover so as to remain inseparable from him even in death. Alfieri himself in the *Vita* depicts his own feelings for the marchioness in similar terms, as an inescapable labyrinth which can only lead to death. However, in his autobiography, Alfieri narrator is distinct from Alfieri lover; the former therefore judges his past self, describing the labyrinth as sordid and his passion as linked to illness. Furthermore, if Alfieri narrator is able to describe a love whose grip he has long since evaded, within the economy of *Agamennone*, Clitennestra is not capable of achieving a similar release from her own love affair. Instead, while she claims to Egisto that she runs “volontaria” toward infamy on his behalf, the tragedy interrogates this autonomy and undermines its integrity. In other words, although Alfieri in the *Parere sulle tragedie* condemns Clitennestra for having betrayed Agamennone in fulfillment of an ignoble passion, the tragedy itself seems to ask to what degree Clitennestra might be rendered culpable by this betrayal and to what extent she acts autonomously within the tragic action.

Agamennone, however, opens with the appearance of an equal degree of autonomy shared by Clitennestra and Egisto. In the first act, each lover reveals the trajectory of revenge she or he

¹⁰⁹ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 140. There exists a notable symmetry between the passions suffered by Alfieri’s tragic heroines and his own depictions of his love affairs in the *Vita*, of which the affair with the marchioness was simply one of several other similarly tempestuous episodes. This symmetry would seem to lead to a measure of sympathy, albeit at times equivocal, for his heroines within the tragic action.

will pursue over the course of the tragedy. First, Egisto invokes his dead father in a scene with Shakespearian undertones and swears an oath of vengeance to Tieste's lurid specter: "Vendetta è guida ai passi miei" (I, 1, v. 13). In the following scene, Clitennestra summons her own ghost, this time of her daughter Ifigenia. Recalling the episode of her daughter's sacrifice by means of Agamennone's deception, she next hears Ifigenia's prosopopoeial supplication, which appears to double as a call for revenge or, at the very least, to sanction her mother's infidelity: "Ami tu madre, l'uccisor mio crudo?" (I, 2, v. 129). This symmetrical structuring of the tragic action ostensibly creates a parallel between Tieste's quest for vengeance and Clitennestra's own desire to avenge the slain Ifigenia; however, Alfieri depicts Clitennestra, at least in *Agamennone*, as largely disinterested in her surviving children.¹¹⁰ This lack of genuine maternal sentiment facilitates the tragedian's use of Ifigenia's sacrifice as a pretense meant to justify Clitennestra's hatred of Agamennone as well as conceal her desire for Egisto. Because of this, Alfieri effectively subordinates her trajectory within the tragic action to her lover's so that the fulfillment of Egisto's oath of vengeance seemingly completes the tragedy's teleology.¹¹¹ Unable to separate herself from Egisto for her love for him, Clitennestra becomes the instrument of his revenge, while Egisto is not animated by any similar amorous desire and will eventually unmask his contempt for her in the subsequent *Oreste*.

Clitennestra's love for Egisto anticipates the masochistic quality of Ottavia's love for Nerone. When Agamennone orders Egisto to quit Argo, Clitennestra in her desperation reaffirms her inseparability from her lover and her willingness to suffer all pains on his behalf:

Tu soffri

¹¹⁰ In the tragedy, Clitennestra coolly refers to her surviving children; "Mi è cara Elettra, e necessario Oreste" (I, 2, v. 125), she states early on.

¹¹¹ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 133. De Lauretis argues that the teleology of tragedy is always masculine, its endpoint being the fulfillment of male desire and the male hero's entry into self-knowledge.

Per me tal onta; ed io per te son presta
 A soffrir tutto; e oltraggio, e stenti, e morte;
 E, se fia d'uopo, anche la infamia. È tempo,
 Tempo è d'oprar.

(IV, 1, vv. 12-16)

Fearing to lose Egisto and be forced to resume a marriage that is loveless on her end, Clitennestra insists that “è tempo / Tempo è d'oprar,” but the tragedy casts doubts on her operative potential within the tragic action, at least as it relates to the question of personal agency. If in her respective tragedy Ottavia continues to love Nerone, willingly assuming a marked degree of passivity, she nonetheless enacts a measure of resistance to the tyrant through her suicide, which thwarts his political designs. Clitennestra in *Agamennone* is rendered similarly, although less consciously, passive by her love for Egisto. If she acts, she acts according to his scheme for vengeance with which his political ambitions are also aligned. After Egisto suggests to her that their only hope lies in Agamennone's murder, she declares to her lover that she will help to make him king: “Doman, tel giuro, il re sarai tu in Argo. / Nè man, nè cor, mi tremerà...” (IV, 1, vv. 149-150).

Yet Clitennestra does tremble when faced with the task of slaying Agamennone. Holding a dagger over her sleeping consort, she hesitates, exclaiming in a reversal of her avowal to Egisto in the preceding act: “Il piede, il cor, la mano, / Io tutta tremo” (V, 1, vv. 7-8). Although she has been described as “una donna vinta fin dal principio dell'azione e del tutto disfatto al compimento della tragedia,”¹¹² this trembling, this vacillation, constitutes her resistance to Egisto and his will, and serves as her vindication of a personal autonomy, which has been eroded over the course of the tragedy by her uncontrollable amorous desire.¹¹³ If Egisto seeks to fulfill his oath to his dead

¹¹² Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 177.

¹¹³ Cf. Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 169. Nay writes, instead, that “Clitennestra, che pur muta e si evolve nel corso delle due tragedie, mantiene tuttavia una cifra costante, quella della debolezza” (Nay, 169).

father, Clitennestra questions her own oath to make him king, still unaware that she is the principal pawn in his vendetta. She also reflects on the marital vows made to Agamennone, whom she stands to betray:

Questa mia destra,
Di casto amor, di fede a lui già pegno,
Per farsi or sta del suo morir ministra?...
Tanto io giurai?

(V, 1, vv. 3-6)

Multiple scholars note that Alfieri tasks Clitennestra with choosing to remain faithful either to Egisto or to Agamennone, with the psychic strain of this choice rendering her tormented interiority the tragedy's focal point.¹¹⁴ Alfieri's privileging of Clitennestra's anguished psychological state throughout the tragedy comes, however, at a cost; it necessitates Agamennone's own reduced presence within the tragic action and his transformation into an unblameworthy and benevolent consort, whose kingly characteristics, and their sociopolitical ramifications, are sacrificed to ensure this thoroughly domestic portrait. By depicting Agamennone as a concerned husband and father, who openly admits to weeping at the memory of his loved ones on the battlefields of Troy:¹¹⁵

Ed io pur, sì, tra le vicende atroci
Di militari imprese; io, sì, fra 'l sangue,
Fra la gloria, e la morte, avea presenti
Voi sempre, e il palpitare, e il pianger vostro,

¹¹⁴ Trovato, *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri*, 71-81. See also Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 175-190. For a reading of Clitennestra's psychological state as an anticipation of Madame Bovary, see Paola Trivero, *Tragiche donne: Tipologie femminili nel teatro italiano del Settecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000), especially pages 87-101.

¹¹⁵ In *The History of Tears*, Anne Vincent-Buffault acknowledges the eighteenth century's predilection for tears, both on the stage and among the theatergoing public. However, she notes that tragedy's requisite heroism existed at odds with depictions of weeping male protagonists. Alfieri's choice to have Agamennone weep was therefore consonant with the age's insistence on a lachrymose sensibility in the theater but remained a slightly controversial departure from classical portrayals of the king. See Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears*, trans. Teresa Bridgeman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 56-57.

E il dubitare, e il non sapere. Io spesso
Chiuso nell'elmo in silenzio piangeva

(II, 4, vv. 238-243)

Alfieri puts to Clitennestra a choice made much more agonizing than it would have been had he followed Aeschylus in portraying Agamennone as an imposing, aloof, and commanding king who does not conceal from his wife the fact that he has taken Cassandra as his new mistress.¹¹⁶ Alfieri's Agamennone, on the other hand, is a faithful husband, entirely scrupulous, who throughout the tragic action shows great solicitude toward his spouse and laments the seeming loss of her former affection for him.¹¹⁷ This domestication of Agamennone is not without risk, as Alfieri himself acknowledges in the *Parere sulle tragedie*, since unless carefully acted, "il suo stato di marito tradito può anche...farlo tendere talvolta nel risibile, per esser cosa delicatissima in sé."¹¹⁸

Alfieri therefore hazards risibility in his portrayal of Agamennone to the effect of more thoroughly villainizing Clitennestra herself, whose ultimate decision to slay her consort is made all the more execrable, especially given the stark contrast of character that Alfieri establishes between Agamennone and Egisto throughout the tragedy. But before she acts in full obedience to her adulterous passion, Clitennestra launches into a series of self-vituperations through which she reveals her awareness of her limited agency, the danger of her amorous desire, and this desire's inability to guarantee her happiness even if satisfied:

Oh tradimento! Pace

¹¹⁶ Agamemnon is thusly depicted in Aeschylus' version of the myth.

¹¹⁷ "Oh qual dolcezza / Saria per me, se apertamente anch'ella / Ogni segreto del suo cor mi aprisse!" (III, 1, vv. 103-105), Agamennone wistfully exclaims to Elettra. Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi note that by softening the character of Agamennone through an emphasis on his expressions of paternal sentiment, Alfieri succeeds in exonerating him of the crime of having sacrificed Ifigenia. See Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 77.

¹¹⁸ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 97.

Sperar poss'io più mai?... qual vita orrenda
 Di rimorsi, e di lagrime, e di rabbia!...
 Egisto stesso, Egisto sì, giacersi
 Come oserà di parricida sposa
 Al fianco infame, in sanguinoso letto,
 E non tremar per sè? — Dell'onta mia,
 D'ogni mio danno orribile stromento,
 Lungi da me, ferro esecrabil, lungi.
 Io perderò l'amante; in un la vita
 Io perderò: ma non per me svenato
 Cotanto eroe cadrà.

(V, 1, vv. 20-30)

Clitennestra's cry of "oh tradimento!" is both a reference to her own adulterous passion and Agamennone's imminent murder at her hands; but it is also an expression of her personal disillusionment as she becomes increasingly aware that her amorous desire cannot guarantee any semblance of peace. She, too, has been betrayed, this time by her own fantasies. However, despite this hesitation over the body of the sleeping Agamennone, Clitennestra eventually slays her consort. Spurred on by Egisto, who convinces her that his life will be imperiled if Agamennone remains alive, and driven to desperation at the imagined loss of her lover, she stabs the king to death. Alfieri ups the emotional stakes of this crime by having Clitennestra kill Agamennone in their marriage bed. As Vincenza Perdichizzi demonstrates, this detail is not found in Seneca's version of the tragedy from which Alfieri took inspiration.¹¹⁹ In addition to highlighting the modernity of Alfieri's drama through its unmistakable bourgeois symbolism,¹²⁰ the choice of

¹¹⁹ Vincenza Perdichizzi, "Le tragedie senecane e i modelli francesi," in *Testi e avantesti alfieriani*, 56. Alfieri writes in the *Vita* that his reading of Seneca motivated him to compose *Agamennone* (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 206).

¹²⁰ Perdichizzi, "Le tragedie senecane e i modelli francesi," in *Testi e avantesti alfieriani*, 56. Perdichizzi notes that Agamemnon's death in classical Latin and Greek tragedy tended to emphasize the cyclicity of myth and ritual by recalling either Thyeste's unwitting cannibalism or the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The death of Alfieri's Agamennone in his marriage bed, instead, confirms that the tragedy's principal crime is Clitennestra's infidelity (Perdichizzi, 56-57).

Agamennone's bed as a metaphor for adulterous passion turned fatal and the danger of lustful women, reinforces the tragedy's inscription in the language of desire.

In her soliloquy, Clitennestra lucidly acknowledges that by performing the murder she will be tainted in the eyes of Egisto, whom she fears will disdain sharing with her a bed stained as a result of her infamy. Although she has not yet been apprised of Egisto's ulterior motive in urging Agamennone's death, she makes an admission of the double bind in which she finds herself and by which her autonomy is delimited within the tragic action through her relationship to the tragedy's male characters. Put differently, she does not differentiate between fidelity to Egisto or to Agamennone because both lead equally to her ruin. Additionally, her revilement of her body contaminated by Agamennone's murder anticipates Egisto's justification of his repudiation of her in *Oreste*, in part, for this same reason.

In both *Filippo* and *Ottavia*, the heroine's agency coincides with her knowledge of the tyrant. Isabella cultivates her selfhood over the course of the tragic action in conjunction with her growing awareness of Filippo's cruelty, and acts in open defiance of his tyranny through her suicide once she realizes his true nature. Ottavia, for her part, knows of Nerone's tyranny from the very start of the tragedy but chooses to remain passive from her love for him. Her suicide is a result of his threat to her reputation, but although it thwarts his political ambitions, she dies without renouncing her love, thereby demonstrating how her amorous desire closely abuts on tyranny. Like these two heroines, Clitennestra finds her position within the tragic action dependent on her knowledge of the tyrant. Unlike either Isabella or Ottavia, however, she comes to know Egisto's villainy only after being successfully used in service of his goals, i.e. the fulfillment of his oath of vengeance to his father and his usurpation of the Argive throne. *Agamennone* thus concludes with Clitennestra embroiled in a crisis of knowledge; "Or ti conosco, Egisto," (V, 6, v. 172), she states

after he calls for the death of Oreste, Agamennone's heir. Her amorous desire having betrayed her, that is, led her to this crisis, she ends the tragedy with her own villainy no longer in doubt.

In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri confirms that in the subsequent *Oreste* Clitennestra ends up punished for her crimes, which encompass not simply the murder of Agamennone but her original blindness to Egisto's iniquity:

Io credo nondimeno, che questa seconda Clitennestra, attesi i rimorsi terribili ch'ella prova, i pessimi trattamenti ch'ella riceve da Egisto, e le orribili perplessità in cui vive, possa ispirare assai più compassione di lei, che la Clitennestra dell'*Agamennone*; e credo, che lo spettatore la possa giudicare quasi abbastanza punita dalla orridezza del presente suo stato.¹²¹

Alfieri's provocative use of the adverb "quasi" when referring to Clitennestra's punishment has already been examined (see Chapter 2). The heroine notably follows Isabella and Ottavia in being a woman repudiated and denigrated over the course of her respective tragedy. But where the previous two women find their heroism couched in their amorous desire, Clitennestra is vilified for the transgression committed in obedience to hers. While both Elettra and Egisto condemn her for her crime, she also upbraids herself throughout the tragedy and exhibits a strong degree of self-loathing that Ottavia, despite her love for Nerone, avoids in her tragedy. "Io son misera assai. / Mi abborro più, che tu non m'odj" (I, 2, vv. 95-96), Clitennestra declares to her daughter early on in the tragedy. Other punishments follow. If the ghosts of Tieste and Ifigenia overhang the previous tragedy, the ghost of Agamennone overhangs, even pursues, the remorseful heroine in *Oreste*; in one instance she states: "Già in vita tutti i rei tormenti io provo del tenebroso Averno" (I, 2, vv. 69-70). Additionally, in fulfillment of her prediction in *Agamennone*, Egisto disdains his now-consort for the king's murder: "Io t'amo, quanto / Tu il meriti" (III, 5, vv. 242-243).

¹²¹ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101.

Oreste, then, emerges as a tragedy bifurcated: on the one hand, it traces the hero's tragic fulfillment of his oath to avenge his father, in a heroic mirroring of Egisto's own oath in the previous tragedy; on the other hand, it concerns itself with demonstrating Clitennestra as a heroine punished for her misdeeds, among which her infidelity to Agamennone and the amorous desire driving her to murder. The previous analysis of the heroine looked at the ways in which the tragedy brings to bear on her maternity, resulting in a fractured identity unable to integrate its two opposing halves: that of mother and that of wife and lover. The opposition between these two identities, considered antithetical within Alfierian tragedy, results in an agency arrested throughout much of the tragic action until Clitennestra breaks the deadlock and sacrifices herself on behalf of Egisto. Picking up the loose threads of that analysis, this examination of Clitennestra concludes by situating her amorous desire within Oreste's and Egisto's desire for vengeance, which takes the form of an oath. The heroine's own amorous desire, as seen in *Agamennone*, also assumes the dimensions of an oath, since she swears in her passion to make Egisto king even though it necessitates her husband's death.

If in *Agamennone* Clitennestra becomes, albeit at times reluctant, the instrument necessary for the realization of Egisto's fulfillment of his oath to Tieste,¹²² in *Oreste* she no longer serves as an instrument but, rather, as an obstacle to the tyrant's quest for revenge on Agamennone's entire line. Having sworn in her passion to make Egisto king, through this same passion she comes to thwart his designs. In fact, Egisto blames her for his initial hesitation to slay Oreste: "Ah! tu ne fosti, iniqua, / Tu la cagion: per te indugiai vendetta, / Ch'ora torna in me" (V, 2, vv. 25-27).

¹²² De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 133.

Clitennestra also acts as an obstacle for Oreste, whose original desire for vengeance, in Alfieri's departure from classical sources of the myth,¹²³ did not include the murder of his mother. Oreste's madness at the conclusion of the tragedy, therefore, results not just from the slaying of Clitennestra but also from the accidental nature of the crime.

Because her amorous desire exists at odds with both the oaths sworn by Egisto and Oreste, Clitennestra likens herself to Ottavia, whose own passion for Nerone contrasts with his revilement of her and his goal of utilizing her as a political tool. But whereas the mistreatment Ottavia endures in her own tragedy redounds to her virtuousness, although not without raising questions regarding the irrationality of her love for the tyrant, Clitennestra's mistreatment at the hands of Egisto and her offspring reads as a punishment for her own uncontrollable passion. She perishes in *Oreste* unable to exert any lasting control over her amorous desire. This is demonstrated by the fact that, unlike either Isabella or Ottavia, she does not take her life in a suicide, which is represented as a rational act in Alfierian tragedy; instead, her death is a mistake. But in her accidental death, she still effects a measure of resistance that subverts any superficial reading of her behavior in the two tragedies as a mere passive capitulation to an illicit and irrepressible love.

Like Isabella and Ottavia, Clitennestra finds her exercise of agency limited by the trajectory of the tragic action which often inconstantly focuses on her, being also concerned with Oreste's quest to avenge his father, and thus intrudes on her capacity for activity. Linda Kintz argues in her analysis of Oedipal tragedy that such tragedy only gives space to one hero and the plot in which he is contained; when two characters intersect within the tragic action, vying for control of the

¹²³ See Nicolò Mineo, "Oreste," in *Alfieri tragico*, eds. Enrico Ghidetti and Roberta Turchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2004), 507.

main plot, “one of its claimants must be killed.”¹²⁴ Through its repeated return to depictions of female amorous desire, Alfierian tragedy interrogates, as it does through other means, the presence and participation of the heroine and her psychological makeup within the tragic action. If this interrogation is often marked by a certain aesthetic anxiety over the role of love in Italian tragedy, whose character was still taking shape in the second half of the eighteenth century, Alfierian tragic theater, nevertheless, utilizes amorous desire as a means of entry into the tense and violent interrelationships between its heroes and heroines, between its heroines and tyrants.

Clitennestra’s demise in *Oreste* demonstrates, once more, how within amorous desire Alfierian tragic theater locates a key site of resistance for its female characters. Although she dies unwittingly slain by Oreste after being vilified for her amorous passion, Clitennestra’s death serves as a stumbling block amidst the other characters’—namely Egisto’s and Oreste’s—efforts to fulfill their oaths. As already seen, both the tragedies *Agamennone* and *Oreste* operate on the tension and contradictions, even irony, inherent in the relationship between oaths and oath-breaking, fidelity and infidelity, avowal and disavowal. In his quest for vengeance, Egisto seduces Clitennestra who then serves as the instrument of his revenge. Unfaithful to Agamennone, she eventually stabs him to death. But although she perishes unable to control her passion for Egisto, her death is the fulfillment of at least one oath sworn in the two tragedies. In *Agamennone*, she declares to her lover, in verses already cited: “Invan divisa / Dalla tua sorte spero la mia sorte: / Se fuggi, io fuggo;

¹²⁴ Kintz, *The Subject’s Tragedy*, 59. See also de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, particularly the chapter “Desire in Narrative,” 103-157. Both de Lauretis and Kintz would add that because tragic narrative operates in fulfillment of the male hero’s journey toward self-knowledge and self-realization, a journey in which women function on the level of the plot rather than as fully psychologically realized characters capable of attaining similar knowledge unless they are already coded as masculine, tragedy must necessarily kill its women who compete with the hero for plot space. For both scholars, the quintessential tragic woman killed for the sake of the hero’s advancement within the plot is Jocasta.

se perisci, io pero” (II, 1, vv. 69-71). In *Oreste*, she avows again to make theirs a shared fate by protecting Egisto, this time from her son:

A lui sottrarti,
Perir dovessi, io giuro. Ah! qui rimani;
In sicuro ti cela; al furor suo
Argin son io frattanto.

(V, 2, vv. 7-10)

With Oreste in hot pursuit of Egisto, Clitennestra follows her consort in order to shield him with her body. Egisto rejects this gesture in a repudiation of the heroine, the fate common to Alfierian desiring heroines in general: “Mal ti fai scudo a me; lasciami; vanne: / A niun patto al mio fianco te non voglio” (V, 2, vv. 29-30). The tyrant’s use of the term “patto” further substantiates the tragedy’s interest, as well as the interest of *Agamennone* which precedes it, in the polyvalent possibilities and ironies located in the theme of betrayal. Agreements, pacts, and oaths can be, and are, betrayed over the course of the tragedy. For her part, Clitennestra breaks her oath to save Egisto’s life with her own body; she remains by his side but fails to protect him from Oreste’s wrath. The hero slays both his mother and her consort in one fell swoop. Death at her son’s hands therefore concludes Clitennestra’s punishment in *Oreste* for crimes stemming from her amorous desire.¹²⁵ While Alfieri in the *Parere sulle tragedie* ascribes her actions in the two tragedies in which she appears to this irrepressible passion,¹²⁶ the heroine is a figure of resistance, nonetheless. Clitennestra “betrays” Egisto by not shielding him from Oreste’s sword and thus betrays, too, his continued pursuit of vengeance. Additionally, with her death she also throws a wrench in Oreste’s own quest to avenge Agamennone and leaves him as crazed as she was described as being when

¹²⁵ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 101.

¹²⁶ Alfieri, 97-101.

in the throes of her own passion for Egisto.¹²⁷ *Oreste* becomes, then, a tragedy of desires unfulfilled, in which neither hero, nor heroine, nor tyrant achieves full satisfaction but comes, instead, to find most of his or her desires, amorous or otherwise, thwarted.¹²⁸ Mario Fubini perhaps understood this when he described *Oreste* as motivated by “la tensione estrema di un volere” that brought the tragedy’s characters into constant conflict with each other.¹²⁹

One desire is, however, fully satisfied in *Oreste*: Clitennestra’s desire to perish alongside Egisto. Despite being vilified in *Agamennone* for her adulterous passion and punished for it in the subsequent *Oreste* through Egisto’s mistreatment of her, her progeny’s disdain for her, and her eventual death at Oreste’s hands, as she dies alongside her lover, Clitennestra is perhaps the character who leaves the tragedy most fulfilled. Additionally, although Alfieri disparages his creation in his commentary, it is her complex, tortured psychology toward which both tragedies ultimately direct their main focus as she attempts to resist, then finally succumbs to her love for the tyrant. If Alfieri “punishes” Clitennestra for her infidelity, he simultaneously acknowledges, through the way in which he positions her with regard to the works’ male characters and relates her passion to their own tragic goals, how tragedy emerges from the excesses of amorous desire, although not without first leading to the vilification of the desiring heroine.

¹²⁷ Throughout *Oreste*, both Egisto and Elettra refer to Clitennestra as having been rendered insane or mad from her desire. A certain symmetry, in which Alfieri is keenly interested in both this tragedy and the preceding *Agamennone*, is therefore established in Oreste’s own descent into madness at the work’s close. However, Oreste’s own madness, as Laura Nay argues, spares him the “tortura dei rimorsi” from which Clitennestra suffered (Nay, *La tirannide degli affetti*, 178).

¹²⁸ Walter Binni insists that *Oreste*, unlike *Agamennone*, displays a lack of unity due to the fact that the tragic aims of Oreste and Clitennestra, the work’s central protagonists, do not successfully fuse within the tragic action. See Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 83. However, it is precisely in this nonconvergence that Clitennestra emerges as a more fully realized heroine within the plot space of the tragedy. Feminist theorists such as de Lauretis and Kintz would perhaps locate in what Binni identifies as a lack of unity the heroine’s resistance to the traditionally masculine teleology of the tragic genre.

¹²⁹ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 195.

b. Rosmunda

Alfieri settled on the idea for *Rosmunda* in 1779 and versified the tragedy the following year before returning to it in 1782. Although he was largely inspired by Machiavelli's account of the Lombard queen in the *Istorie fiorentine* (1532), the tragedy's ending resembles a scene from Antoine-François Prévost d'Exiles's *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité qui s'est retiré du monde* (1728), reflecting Alfieri's eclectic sources of inspiration as well as the cues he still took from French literature despite his often unfavorable opinion of French tragedy.¹³⁰

Within Alfieri's tragic pantheon, Rosmunda is an atypical heroine.¹³¹ Violent, ferocious, and cruel, she is a figure more villainous than her precursor Clitennestra. Unlike the latter woman, she is not seduced by a manipulative lover into committing murder but, rather, commences the tragedy having already orchestrated the murder of her husband, Alboino. Alfieri describes her in terms whose severity is unmatched by his descriptions of his other tragic heroines; she is "crudelissima, despótica, matrigna severa, piena d'ambizione, e di sdegno contro il morto marito."¹³² Moreover, within the economy of the tragedy, she exercises her amorous desire in ways unique to her among Alfierian heroines. Where in *Agamennone* Clitennestra is seduced, Rosmunda in the eponymous tragedy seduces Almachilde, a Lombardic warrior who slays the despotic Alboino and is rewarded with marriage to the queen and a seat on the throne. One of Alfieri's "donne forti," Rosmunda thus wields more power than heroines such as Isabella or Ottavia.¹³³ Yet

¹³⁰ Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 120.

¹³¹ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 84.

¹³² Alfieri, "Note sui personaggi di alcune tragedie," in *Parere sulle tragedie*, 378.

¹³³ The other tragic women whom Alfieri designates as "forti" are Antigone, Virginia, and Sofonisba (Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 150).

in her depiction Alfieri sets up a similar relationship between amorous desire and agency, so that her passion for Almachilde becomes the means through which to gauge her exercise of autonomy within the tragic action and through which to understand her relationship to the tragedy's other figures, all of whom are motivated by amorous desire. While Rosmunda loves Almachilde, the warrior is infatuated with Romilda. However, he has a rival for her affections in Ildovaldo, whose love Romilda reciprocates. Because of this complicated web of passions in which each of the tragedy's four protagonists is enmeshed, *Rosmunda*, then, stands as one of Alfieri's most intricate and sustained explorations into the role exercised by love in tragedy. Rather than make love a secondary focus of the tragic plot as in the earlier *Filippo*, Alfieri in *Rosmunda* sidelines political concerns in order to give love and its tragic repercussions his main attention. If amorous desire becomes a metaphor for understanding the unfolding of the tragic action in the preceding *Agamennone* and *Oreste*, amorous desire is overtly and unequivocally on display in *Rosmunda*. In fact, it is its driving force. This is a first in Alfierian tragic theater and creates an intriguing contrast with Alfieri's next tragedy to treat love as its main theme: *Mirra*. In this tragedy, as Enrico Mattioda writes, love is "costantemente tenuto lontano non solo dalla sdolcinatura, ma dalla sua rivelazione stessa."¹³⁴ While Alfieri makes love highly visible in *Rosmunda* and has its characters openly speak of their amorous desire and its effects, he charts a reverse course in *Mirra*, where he investigates the psychological consequences of Mirra's attempt to suppress an ultimately insuppressible passion.

Through its look at Rosmunda, this analysis of amorous desire in Alfierian tragedy closes with an examination of the ways in which the heroine differs from the desiring heroines who precede her and, albeit taking cues from Clitennestra, becomes Alfieri's most villainous tragic

¹³⁴ Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento*, 63.

heroine,¹³⁵ a woman who claims for herself more power within the tragic action than all other Alfierian heroines before or after her. Yet despite being Alfieri's most tyrannical female figure, and thus invested with a singular agency with respect to other heroines who are themselves victims of tyranny, she is punished within the tragedy for actions performed as a result of an excess of passion and all its attendant sentiments: hatred, fear, jealousy, and fury. This analysis therefore looks at how amorous desire becomes both an instrument of her agency and a sign of its incompleteness. For Julia Kristeva, amorous desire represents the lack of possession of the desired object.¹³⁶ This sense of lack permeates the entire tragedy, since Rosmunda's power, as will be seen, is not absolute, as in the case of other tyrants, such as Filippo; and her desire for Almachilde meets with his indisputable rejection of her. Moreover, this sense of lack features, unsurprisingly, in Alfieri's own critical evaluation of the work. Nevertheless, it exists in tension with the tragedy's simultaneous focus on excess, on the excessive sentiments by which the work's characters—and Rosmunda, principally—are driven. From this tension the heroine emerges as a psychologically nuanced figure, at once powerful in her exercise of amorous desire and powerless to satisfy it completely.

The idea of lack coloring Alfieri's assessment of *Rosmunda* in the *Parere sulle tragedie* appears in his suggestion of a link between the eponymous heroine and his previous creation, Clitennestra. For the tragedian, Rosmunda falls short as a heroine because she is not a figure from classical antiquity. As such, she cannot “andar del pari con Clitennestra,”¹³⁷ to whom the distance

¹³⁵ Ambitious and motivated by love for power rather than love for Nerone, Poppea deserves a mention as another villainous Alfierian female figure. However, her role is supporting within the tragedy and largely meant to accentuate Nerone's villainy and contrast with Ottavia's virtuousness.

¹³⁶ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 155.

¹³⁷ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 111.

of time lends, as well as to all other heroes from ancient Greek and Latin tragedy, an incomparable grandeur. Instead, taken from Machiavelli's account in the *Istorie fiorentine*, Rosmunda emerges from the Middle Ages, from the "secoli bassi," as Alfieri terms them, which are "per la loro barbarie e ignoranza così nauseosi."¹³⁸ Alfieri's is a negative evaluation of the Middle Ages pervasive in the eighteenth century.¹³⁹ Additionally, if Rosmunda, due to the historical period in which she appears, lacks a certain greatness of character possessed by figures such as Clitennestra, she lacks, too, along with the tragedy as a whole, "quella venerazione preventiva" which Alfieri believed necessary to foster in spectators but which only those tragedies whose subject matter had classical precedent could reliably cultivate.¹⁴⁰ As a heroine without a classical pedigree, Rosmunda evinces Alfieri's anxieties toward untested tragic material, since he writes in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that the eponymous tragedy is entirely his own invention, being most likely unfamiliar with the several sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century tragedies that also treat the figure.¹⁴¹

This lack of classical insulation, so to speak, shapes Alfieri's portrayal of Rosmunda through its relationship to the excessive sentiment which defines her character. He writes:

Rosmunda, è carattere di una singolare ferocia, ma pure non inverosimile, visti i tempi: e forse non del tutto indegna di pietà riesce costei, se prima che alle sue crudeltà si pon mente alle crudeltà infinite a lei usate da altri. Ove se le fosse dato

¹³⁸ Alfieri, 112.

¹³⁹ Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 112. The tragedian writes: "Io certamente ho errato nello scegliere sì fatti tempi per innestare questa mia favola. Credo oltre ciò, che sia anche mal fatto di volere interamente inventare il soggetto d'una tragedia; perché il fatto non essendo noto a nessuno, non può acquistarsi quella venerazione preventiva, ch'io credo quasi necessaria, massimamente nel cuore dello spettatore affinché egli si presti alla illusione teatrale" (Alfieri, 112).

¹⁴¹ Other tragedians who treated the story of Rosmunda prior to Alfieri include Giovanni Rucellai, Antonio Cavallerino, and Giuseppe Gorini Corio. See Guido Santato, *Tra mito e palinodia: Itinerari alfieriani* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1999), 280; Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 75; and Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 120. It is important to note that, in stark contrast with Alfieri, these earlier authors focus on Rosmunda's revenge against Alboino.

un più caldo amore per Almachilde, la di lei gelosia e crudeltà sarebbe riuscita più calda, e quindi più compatita: ma bisognava pur darle altre tinte che all'amor di Romilda: oltre che l'amore nelle persone feroci ha sempre un certo colore aspro e inamabile.¹⁴²

This description reveals the antinomies around which Alfieri crafts the figure of Rosmunda, whose barbarous love conforms to the tragedian's conception of medieval peoples as unenlightened and extreme in their passions. Rosmunda, therefore, is a heroine both pitiful and pitiless in her singular ferocity; jealous in her amorous desire and yet not jealous enough to warrant compassion; a desiring heroine who in her cruelty is unlovable. Therefore, she will possess and simultaneously lack throughout the tragic action.

What Rosmunda possesses renders her an exceptional figure within Alfieri's tragic pantheon. Like Clitennestra, she is a queen, but unlike the former heroine, she is a queen who exercises political power rather than comes to be manipulated by her lover.¹⁴³ In the first act, Alfieri demonstrates the power that she wields as queen as she and Romilda, her stepdaughter, await anxiously the outcome of the battle occurring unseen outside the castle's walls. Having broken faith with Rosmunda following the death of Alboino and her usurpation of the throne, Clefi and his loyal followers engage her forces, led by Almachilde. Although she has entrusted her new consort with the power to make military decisions on her behalf, Rosmunda notably retains an interest in the events taking place beyond her castle in Pavia and expects her will to be upheld. While its events unfold within the confines of the castle, *Rosmunda*, then, is not entirely domestic

¹⁴² Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 113-114.

¹⁴³ Another reigning queen who exercises political power, albeit inconsistently, within Alfierian tragedy is Maria Stuarda from the eponymous tragedy, which was conceived in 1778, put into prose the following year, then versified in 1780 and 1782. However, Maria Stuarda lacks the force of passion which renders Rosmunda a figure worthy of tragedy in Alfieri's estimation. In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, he describes the Scottish queen, an ancestor of the Countess of Albany's husband, as "regalmente governata da Botuello, raggirata da Ormondo, spaventata e agitata da Lamorre" (Alfieri, 110). Maria Stuarda thus does not wield power independently and so exhibits more commonalities with Clitennestra than Rosmunda.

in scope, at a remove from the political questions that, as Alfieri reveals, have intruded on the tragedy's more overt domestic concerns of love and marriage. As such, when Romilda expresses her hope that Clefi's forces will prevail over those commanded by Almachilde, the traitor who murdered her father and was then permitted to wed his wife, Rosmunda's reply reveals how her actions are motivated by a fusion of political and personal vendettas:

A ogni uom, che far le mie vendette ardisse
 Dovuto premio era mia mano. A infausta
 Nozze col crudo padre tuo mi trasse
 Necessità feroce. Orfana, vinta,
 M'ebbe Alboín, tinto del sangue ancora
 Dell'infelice mio padre Comundo:
 L'empio Alboín, disperditor de' miei,
 Depredator del mio paterno regno,
 Di mie sventure insultatore.

(I, 1, vv. 34-42)

In the same scene, in the same exchange with Romilda, Rosmunda also expresses her cognizance of the limits of political necessity and its devolution into unmitigated and unjustified cruelty. When Romilda admits that Alboino was callous in his treatment of Rosmunda but justified due to the martial conflict between him and Comundo, Rosmunda's father, the queen replies:

Di guerra dritto?
 Nella più cruda inospita contrada
 Dritto fu mai, ch'empio furore, e scherno
 Le insepolti de' morti ossa insultasse?

(vv. 90-93)

What follows is Rosmunda's harrowing description of the banquet ("Banchetto a me di morte," she specifies [I, 1, v. 95]) in which a victorious Alboino forced her to drink from the skull of her slain father.¹⁴⁴ She, then, to an extent greater than Giocasta, part of whose tragedy concerns the

¹⁴⁴ Rosmunda recounts the grisly tale to Romilda:

Nol vegg'io sempre, a quella orribil cena

duel fought between Polinice and Eteocle outside the walls of Thebes, is a heroine fully aware of how politics impinges on domestic concerns. Therefore, to realize her revenge, she conducts it, in part, on the battlefield: in Almachilde's efforts against the forces of Clefi and, later, in the battle she orchestrates between Almachilde and Ildovaldo, rivals for Romilda's love.

Rosmunda also exercises the unique power granted to her within the tragedy in another way. Having been forcibly wed to Alboino, whose cruelty motivates her treatment of Romilda, she attempts to insert herself into the political exchanges underlying marriage. To that end, she agrees to wed her stepdaughter to Alarico in exchange for his support in the fight against the rebellious Clefi.¹⁴⁵ By wedding her stepdaughter to Alarico, a king whose barbarousness mirrors that of Alboino, Rosmunda looks to exert agency in the patriarchal system that ensured her first loveless marriage. It is a display of her political might and astuteness, since Alarico will receive Romilda as recompense for his military assistance, as well as a step in her more private quest for vengeance in which the question of amorous desire plays a key role. By asserting herself within the

(Banchetto a me di morte) ebro d'orgoglio,
 D'ira, e di sangue, a mensa infame assiso,
 Ir motteggiando? e di vivande e vino
 Carco, nol veggio (ahi fera orrida vista!)
 Bere a sorsi lentissimi nel teschio
 Dell'ucciso mio padre? indi inviarmi
 D'abborrita bevanda ridondante
 L'orrida tazza?

(I, 1, vv. 94-102)

¹⁴⁵ "In cambio darti
 De' pattuiti ajuti, che a me presta
 Contro Clefi Alarico io la regale
 Fede mia n'impegnai."

(I, 1, vv. 54-57)

mechanisms of a marital exchange that, according to Luce Irigaray, is the prerogative of men,¹⁴⁶ Rosmunda vindicates an agency which was denied her in her forced marriage to Alboino. She also vindicates, if not the right to exercise amorous desire, which for Irigaray is denied women in their exchange among men,¹⁴⁷ the right to abrogate Romilda's own by condemning her to a conjugal union similarly loveless and in which women are reduced to political pawns.¹⁴⁸

If love is abolished in her move to arrange a marriage between Romilda and Alarico, it returns in her seduction of Almachilde, the third way in which she uniquely exercises power within the tragedy. In *Filippo*, *Ottavia*, *Agamennone*, and *Oreste*, the desiring heroine is generally repudiated by the tyrant and lacks all seductive capacities. Rosmunda, then, is the only heroine who through her powers of seduction is able to tap effectively into her amorous desire and exert control over a male figure.

In the first scene of Act III, Romilda reproaches Almachilde for shifting the blame of Alboino's murder to Rosmunda. Whereas the latter woman is guilty of adultery, it was Almachilde himself, as Romilda recalls, who actually slew the king and remains culpable for the act, notwithstanding the fact that he was manipulated by Rosmunda:

A tutti è noto,

¹⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170-191. In her seminal application of Marxist thought to the societal institution of marriage, Irigaray writes that "woman thus has value only in that she can be exchanged" (Irigaray, 176).

¹⁴⁷ See Irigaray, 170-191. For Irigaray, female desire does not exist in marriage, since marriage operates as an exchange of women as commodities, whose transfer within this institution is a reflection of male desire. Marriage thus divests women of their desire, invalidates them as desiring subjects, and symbolically metamorphoses them into specula both of male desire and men's capacity to exercise and realize it.

¹⁴⁸ Romilda's lack of agency is also seen in Ildovaldo and Almachilde's duel for her hand in Act V. While the duel is, in part, orchestrated by Rosmunda, who frees Ildovaldo whom her consort had earlier thrown in chains, it is a revealing demonstration of the minimal agency Romilda is permitted to exert over her amorous desire. It also indicates the limited extent of Rosmunda's own agency, since her efforts to govern Romilda's fate, as retribution for the way in which her fate was similarly governed by Alboino, are curbed by the interventions of Ildovaldo and Almachilde.

Ch'eri sforzato al tradimento orrendo
 Dalle minacce sue: ma pur la scelta
 Fra il tuo morire, o al tuo signor dar morte,
 Ella ti dava. È ver, dell'empia fraude
 Ignaro tu, contaminato aveva
 Già il talamo del re: ma col tuo sangue,
 Col sangue in un della impudica donna,
 Tu lavarlo dovevi; ammenda ell'era
 Al tuo delitto sola: e ammenda osasti
 Pur farne tu con vie maggior delitto?

(vv. 33-43)

Paola Trivero notes that in depicting Rosmunda as a seductress Alfieri borrows from his Machiavellian source material.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, as the tragedian's only seductress, she finds imputed to her the crime of adultery rather than the murder of Alboino, with which Almachilde is charged. In fact, while Romilda ascribes guilt to him for her father's murder, she condemns Rosmunda for her infidelity multiple times throughout the tragedy.¹⁵⁰ The iniquity of this crime is heightened by the fact that Rosmunda proceeded to marry Alboino's murderer after her seduction brought about its desired ends: "Tu, che di sposa osasti / A un traditor tuo suddito dar mano?" (I, 1, vv. 32-33) Romilda questions in disbelief. Rosmunda's voluntary act of marrying Almachilde following Alboino's death is, then, another instance of the power with which the tragedy invests her, enabling her to insert herself within the exchanges undergirding the institution of marriage and in which she attempts to reinsert herself with her decision to wed Romilda to Alarico. In *Oreste*, Clitennestra has presumably been married to Egisto for ten years, i. e. the time that has

¹⁴⁹ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 76. In the *Istorie fiorentine*, Machiavelli writes that Rosmunda takes the place of a maidservant beloved by Almachilde and, unbeknownst to the warrior, enjoys his sexual favors.

¹⁵⁰ Throughout *Rosmunda*, Alboino is evoked by the tragedy's characters. His ghost, therefore, hovers throughout the tragic action like the ghosts of Tieste and Agamennone in the tragedies *Agamennone* and *Oreste*. However, Rosmunda, unlike Clitennestra, does not appear to be haunted by the memory of the slain Alboino. It is instead Almachilde, as the king's assassin, who in his guilt feels the weight of his presence. The fact that Rosmunda is unbothered by her former consort's ghost not only speaks to her villainy, but also to Alfieri's own sympathy for his heroine who was maltreated by Alboino before his death.

elapsed since Agamennone's murder; but Alfieri neither mentions how this marriage took place, nor the degree to which Clitennestra participated willingly. The heroine's marriage to Egisto is therefore a slightly problematic enterprise, given that the preceding *Agamennone* concludes with her discovery of the tyrant's vendetta and *Oreste* itself opens with her bitter acknowledgment of her unhappy remarriage. However, in choosing whom to marry, Rosmunda exercises an agency which differentiates her from Clitennestra, who throughout *Agamennone* is seduced and duped by Egisto. Rosmunda thus aligns herself with Egisto through her capacity to manipulate Almachilde and drive him to murder.

But if within Alfierian tragedy Rosmunda possesses a singular degree of agency for a desiring heroine, the tragedy as it unfolds illuminates the limits of this agency and her lack of power and control within the tragic action. If it is through her amorous desire that Rosmunda is able to seduce Almachilde and operate as an agent of this desire, this same amorous desire, too, becomes in her case a marker of instability. As such, while the tragedy commences by shoring up Rosmunda's agency through evidence of her political maneuvers both on the battlefield and off, of which wedding Romilda to Alarico is the culminating stroke of this power, the rest of the tragedy acts to undo this agency. It comes as no surprise, then, that Rosmunda's most significant exercises of power—her seduction of Almachilde and orchestration of Alboino's murder, her negotiations with Alarico concerning Romilda's wedding, her strategizing on the battlefield—all occur before the real events of the tragedy begin and serve as exposition motivating what follows.

If while the tragedy unfolds Rosmunda's agency is threatened, it is threatened as a result of an excess of passion as she loses her ability to exert control over her amorous desire. Alfieri links the heroine's hatred of Romilda not only to the young woman's descent from Alboino but, more intimately, as the former reveals in a soliloquy, to a depthless, personal jealousy:

...Quant'io abborro costei, neppure io stessa
 Il so. Cagioni, assai ve n'ha; ma troppo
 Alla mia pace importa il non chiarirne
 La più vera, e maggiore. Il cor mi sbrana
 Un dubbio orrendo...

(I, 2, vv. 119-123)

This “dubbio orrendo” is her suspicion of an amorous sympathy on the part of Almachilde for Alboino’s daughter, as she later goes on to admit: “Talvolta a lei senza adirarsi ei parla; / E d’essa pur senza adirarsi ei parla” (I, 2, vv. 128-129).¹⁵¹ Alfieri justifies Rosmunda’s odium more on the basis of her jealousy of Romilda than Alboino’s mistreatment of her. This choice reflects Alfieri’s interest in amorous desire as the tragedy’s main operating force, which propels the action to its conclusion. Multiple scholars have identified Rosmunda’s hatred as stemming from an ultimately inexhaustible source,¹⁵² but although the tragedy arguably declines to plumb the absolute depths of this odium (“Vendetta io mai pari all’oltraggio avrei?” [I, 1, v. 110] Rosmunda declares early on), it links this hatred to her amorous desire and presents it as growing in proportion to her increasing inability to channel this desire to achieve her own ends. In the first scene of Act I, her power is at its acme; by the third scene of the same act, she declares to Almachilde, recently returned victorious from the battle against Clefi’s forces: “Che sarei senza te? nulla m’è il trono / Nulla il viver, se teco io nol divido” (vv. 158-159). This expression of insecurity is prompted by jealousy and a fear of loss with an antecedent in Clitennestra’s relationship with Egisto. Yet if

¹⁵¹ Fubini argues that these lines exhibit a Metastasian inflection. See Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 213.

¹⁵² Ines Ceccoli argues that Rosmunda’s odium “si confonde in una unica insaziabile atrocità che la donna non sa come pienamente soddisfare” (Ceccoli, *L’eroina alfieriana*, 105). Fubini writes that Rosmunda in her hatred is “inappagata in quella sua brama di vendetta e di strage (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero e la tragedia*, 217). Walter Binni insists that the heroine’s “rancore insaziabile” is the “vero motivo della sua azione” (Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 91). Guido Santato describes Rosmunda’s tragedy as propelled by “una ossessionata, paranoica fenomenologia dell’odio” (Santato, *Tra mito e palinodia*, 284).

Oreste concludes with Clitennestra unable to extricate herself from Egisto, given her insurmountable passion for him, Alfieri in *Rosmunda* charts a different trajectory for amorous desire that will end in the mortal duel between the eponymous heroine and Almachilde. If love and desire lead to death in Alfierian tragedy, he shows there are many ways to get there.

Paola Trivero argues that in the tragedy there is a transfer of seductive capacity from Rosmunda to Romilda.¹⁵³ Rosmunda's doubts about Almachilde's fidelity are confirmed by Act III, in which her consort openly declares his love for Romilda. Earlier in Act II, these doubts intensify as a result of the protests of Ildovaldo, the young warrior who returns Romilda's affections, and Almachilde himself. Both men object to Rosmunda's decision to wed her stepdaughter to Alarico. But while Rosmunda briefly appears in the third scene of the second act, primarily so that Ildovaldo and Almachilde might have someone to whom to address their objections, thus increasing her suspicions, Alfieri largely dedicates Act II to scenes of Ildovaldo and Romilda's mutual love. Ildovaldo's oath of fidelity to Romilda and his pursuit of vengeance on her behalf, along with Romilda's own oath to remain living unless the direness of the situation forces her hand, anticipate, ironically, Almachilde's infidelity in the third act. Furthermore, the tragedy's repeated return to the language of oaths recalls the tension between oath and oath-breaking that Alfieri earlier establishes in *Agamennone* and *Oreste*.

In the second scene of Act III, having confessed his love to Romilda in the preceding scene, Almachilde vituperates Rosmunda after she happens upon her consort and stepdaughter. His words repeat the repudiation of the desiring heroine already seen in Isabella, Ottavia, and Clitennestra but are unparalleled in their ferocity. Even Egisto's revilement of Clitennestra in *Oreste*, which

¹⁵³ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 66. In her analysis of *Rosmunda*, Trivero focuses heavily on the typologies of *matrigna* (stepmother) and *figliastra* (stepdaughter), arguing that Rosmunda's jealousy at Romilda's ability to sway the hearts of men locates its precedent in fairytales, which abound in depictions of the antagonistic relationship between stepmothers and stepdaughters.

redounds to her pathetic and confused state as mother and lover unreconciled, lacks the incisive energy of Almachilde's rejection of the heroine:

Distanza corre,
 Fra Rosmunda e Romilda, immensa; e il senti.
 Amo Romilda, e i traditori abborro.
 Ove possa tua fera ira superba
 Trarmi, già il so; nota a me sei, pur troppo!
 Deh, potess'io così, come ho trafitto
 Il padre a lei, morir pur io! potessi
 Placar, spirando, di Romilda il giusto
 Sdegno! Deh mai non ti foss'io marito!
 Ch'io regicida, e traditor non fora;
 E all'amor mio Romilda il cor sì chiuso
 Or non avrebbe.

(vv. 134-145)

Almachilde's words effectively seal the transfer of seductive capacity from Rosmunda and Romilda, who otherwise despises her father's murderer and upbraids him for his lack of fidelity to his consort however wicked.¹⁵⁴ The warrior's confession of love for Romilda highlights, too, the general absence of pity for Rosmunda on the part of the tragedy's other characters. Although she has suffered cruelly at the hands of Alboino,¹⁵⁵ and Alfieri himself admits in the *Parere sulle tragedie* that she is a figure pitiable to a certain extent, the tragedy's other three characters—Romilda, Almachilde, and Ildovaldo—show her little understanding. In her disgust at the married Almachilde's admission of love, only Romilda extends to the heroine a slight and fleeting

¹⁵⁴ When Almachilde insists that he assume responsibility for seeking vengeance on behalf of Romilda, she declares: “Va, traditor: non fossi altro che ingrato / Alla tua donna tu, troppo anco fora / Per farti a me esecrabile” (IV, 2, vv. 142-144).

¹⁵⁵ In one of the few studies dedicated entirely to Alfierian tragic women, Bertilia Herrera writes that Rosmunda is “abused in the extreme,” a victim of patriarchal society that leaves women “simply and totally unprotected,” in “Racine, Alfieri, and Schiller: A Comparative Study of Heroines,” 187.

compassion.¹⁵⁶ Like Clitennestra, Rosmunda finds, then, that her tragedy encompasses a double infidelity; the consequences of her own infidelity play out in her consort's unfaithfulness or rejection of her. But whereas Clitennestra's discovery of Egisto's disdain for her fails to sever her attachment to him, Rosmunda's discovery of Almachilde's love for Romilda gives new impetus to her hatred and drives her to revenge through to the close of the tragedy. The different trajectories taken by both Clitennestra and Rosmunda in their respective tragedies are closely linked to the degree of their villainy and agency. As Egisto's dupe, Clitennestra is controlled by and punished for her amorous desire, which she resists unsuccessfully until her death. Rosmunda, on the other hand, as the tragedy's most villainous figure, remains its principal mover and shaker; Almachilde's outrage to her love for him spotlights the limits of her power within the tragic action, but it is her subsequent thirst for revenge which animates the tragedy's closing acts as she manipulates Ildovaldo into serving as the agent of her vendetta against her unfaithful consort.

This revenge is fueled by an excess of sentiment. When Romilda begs Rosmunda to free Ildovaldo, who has been thrown into chains by a jealous Almachilde, the heroine reacts with jealousy suffused with her characteristic hatred and rage and an element of indecision. This indecisiveness is new to her: "Già vendicata appieno / Tu sei di me; misera io resto, e farti / Deggio felice... E il deggio?" (IV, 5, vv. 302-307). Rosmunda has the power to liberate Ildovaldo and make both him and Romilda happy to spite Almachilde, who has undermined her political authority, but her hesitation to do so indicates that she wields her power for less than political purposes.

¹⁵⁶ Romilda reacts in indignation when Almachilde offers to slay Rosmunda: "Or, sappi, iniquo, / Che per quant'io l'abborra, aver vo' pria / Di te vendetta, che di lei" (IV, 3, vv. 221-223).

Despite the political power she holds as queen within the tragic action, Rosmunda, unlike many male tyrants who populate Alfierian tragedy, is not a political tyrant, avid for control over her subjects and members of her court. Her political power is, instead, an extension of her amorous desire and exists to achieve its ends. But this does not mean that Rosmunda's tyranny is domestic in a way similar to Filippo's in his enigmatic hatred of Carlo, his son. Rosmunda's own hatred is not the maternal equivalent of this paternal enmity, given that she has no offspring and views Romilda less as a stepdaughter than as a reflection of the affections and happiness denied her.¹⁵⁷ Romilda's particular spectral quality is apparent in Rosmunda's subsequent effusions of rage and despair following Romilda's reveal that Almachilde intends to take the heroine's life and restore the throne to Alboino's daughter:

E tanto
 Per te s'imprende?... Oh! chi sei tu? qual merto
 Sì grande in te? — Tu menti. — Oh rabbia!... e fia,
 Ch'orrido arcano, a me svelar tu il deggi?...
 Ch'io salva sia, per te? — Se arride il cielo
 Ai voti tuoi, vanne da me sì lungi,
 Ch'io più non oda in te mai: felice
 Fa ch'io mai non ti vegga... Esci.

(IV, 5, vv. 316-323)

Loved by both Ildovaldo and Almachilde, Romilda is within the economy of the tragedy the mirror opposite of Rosmunda. The amorous desire of heroines such as Isabella and Ottavia is linked to their knowledge of that desire and its object, along with their capacity to exercise such desire as

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, in particular the chapter "Una matrigna," 51-85. Paola Trivero's in-depth reading hews closely to familial typologies, as strongly suggested by the chapter's title. It refrains, however, from investigating the means by which amorous desire destabilizes the tragedy's power dynamics so that Rosmunda's jealousy of Romilda is less that of a jealous rival in love than that of a woman denied control and agency.

subjects.¹⁵⁸ As the cited verses attest, Rosmunda arrives, instead, at a lucid awareness of her horridness, of the loathsomeness which differentiates her from Romilda, and which has repelled Almachilde, who does not reciprocate her love. While Nerone, too, is an Alfierian tyrant driven, albeit only in part, by his passion for Poppea, Rosmunda is characterized, diversely, by her excessive sentiment, by her thwarted amorous desire which transforms into an implacable hatred and rage. If Nerone demonstrates that amorous desire is not a wholly foreign sentiment among Alfierian tyrants, Rosmunda is one of the few tyrants defined by excessive effusions of sentiment as well as a certain psychological disequilibrium. As his only female tyrant, Rosmunda is an exception within Alfieri's tragic pantheon. However, the specific lineaments of her character are no coincidence. Only Saul in his madness departs similarly from the cruel and coolly rational model of masculinized tyranny typically found in Alfierian tragedy.

Although Alfieri has Rosmunda confront the monstrousness of her nature, which renders her an undesirable object in the eyes of Almachilde and nullifies her ability to exercise her amorous desire to achieve her ends, she retains a large degree of agency through to the close of the tragedy. By Act V, she has already freed Ildovaldo so that he might face Almachilde on the battlefield, vie for Romilda's hand, and simultaneously obtain revenge for her by slaying his rival. As the forces of both warriors engage in battle, Rosmunda waits alone with Romilda in a recall to the tragedy's opening battle between Almachilde's and Clefi's forces. Having orchestrated the duel between Ildovaldo and Almachilde, she is assailed by doubts that expose the limits of her agency and the depths of her misery. She says to Romilda:

All'armi

¹⁵⁸ Isabella gains an understanding of Filippo's cruelty and resists his tyranny through a suicide animated by her desire for Carlo. Clitennestra ends *Agamennone* embroiled in a crisis of knowledge upon the realization of Egisto's perfidy and his manipulation of her. Ottavia, for her part, does not enter into any knowledge within her tragedy; but her preexisting knowledge of Nerone's brutality and hatred does not, in fact, preclude her continued desire for him.

Per te si corre: impareggiabil merto!
 Novella Elena tu! rivi di sangue
 Scorrer oggi farai: per te spergiuri
 Fansi i martiri; per te prodi i vili,
 E superbi i dimessi.

(V, 3, vv. 52-57)

Rosmunda's is therefore the realization of her lack of control and of the insufficiency of her agency due to her inability to stimulate desire in the men around her, unlike Romilda, whom she describes as a "novella Elena." Through her amorous desire Alfieri channels Rosmunda's reflections on her limited power within the tragic action, since, despite her orchestrations, Almachilde and Ildovaldo duel for reasons that have little to do with her. Rosmunda therefore wields less control over the plot than many of the male tyrants whose ranks she joins. In another notable difference from typical Alfierian characters, unlike most other women who populate Alfieri's tragic pantheon, she does not weep, a gesture meant to generate pity from the reader or spectator. Instead, her lucid, albeit raged-filled, reflections on her misery link her to Clitennestra and Mirra, other Alfierian women who, if they weep, possess a similarly deep psychological insight into the often otherwise inscrutable causes of their misfortune, solitude, and unhappiness. As such, while waiting still with Romilda for the battle to decide its victor, Rosmunda declares: "A orribil vita io resto, / Qual sia l'evento" (V, 3, vv. 81-82). She adds: "So, che finor son tutti / Di sangue i voti miei; nè sangue io veggo, / Che ad appagarmi basti" (V, 3, vv. 85-87).

Rosmunda's knowledge of her limited agency and of her unhappiness, which no exercise of agency can mitigate, leads her to express joy at Almachilde's return from the battle, since this thwarts Romilda and Ildovaldo's chance at happiness: "Oh gioja! / Ecco Almachilde: e vincitor lo scorgo: / E puniratti, spero" (V, 4, vv. 122-124). This momentary relief immediately turns to rage in the subsequent, and final, scene of the tragedy. Holding Romilda at knifepoint, Rosmunda

attempts to wield her power one last time by controlling the actions of Ildovaldo and Almachilde, who, in their efforts to spare Romilda, also become her hostages, as Paola Trivero points out.¹⁵⁹ The scene proceeds at a tense and rapid clip due to the characters' short rejoinders and Alfieri's use of pregnant brachylogies; it is Rosmunda's last attempt at manipulation and mastery within the tragic action. When Almachilde attempts to check her agency by declaring his wish that Romilda be arbiter of everyone present, Rosmunda included, she exclaims in furious disbelief: "Donna di me costei? di me?" (V, 5, v. 140); and flexes her outraged agency by pressing the point of her knife closer to Romilda's breast: "Nel petto / Io questo stil già già le immergo..." (V, 5, vv. 140-141).

While Rosmunda's villainy in this scene, and in much of the tragedy in general, has been read as motivated by her intense jealousy of Romilda, which assumes the heightened dimensions of a stepmother's jealousy of her stepdaughter in fairytales,¹⁶⁰ this closing scene serves as Rosmunda's vindication of the agency outraged by Almachilde and threatened by Romilda throughout the tragedy. As such, she demands that Almachilde and Ildovaldo send away their remaining troops, assembled to depose her and rescue Romilda. In another revealing powerplay, she demands, too, that Almachilde acknowledge her as queen: "Io sono, / Io son qui dunque ancor regina?" (V, 5, vv. 155-156). Trivero argues that in this scene Rosmunda takes on a masculine persona, acting less as a heroine than as a hero of evil ("eroe del male"): "I due personaggi maschili

¹⁵⁹ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 70.

¹⁶⁰ Trivero, 51. Analyzing the first two scenes of the tragedy, Trivero writes: "Questa crudele matrigna e la figliastra perseguitata non escono dalle pagine di una fiaba, bensì—come è dato intuire—dalle prime due scene della *Rosmunda* di Vittorio Alfieri. Eppure le movenze del personaggio di Rosmunda hanno parecchi dei requisiti che si confanno alla 'matrigna' della tradizione favolistica" (Trivero, 51).

soggiacciono a quello femminile che, secondo uno scarto non infrequente nella tragedia, agisce come un eroe, eroe del male, ma pur sempre eroe.”¹⁶¹

Alfieri couples Rosmunda’s last show of force with another acknowledgment, on her part, of its incompleteness and of her frustrated amorous desire. Before she plunges the knife into Romilda, she exclaims:

Al furor mio,
 Tu basti, quasi. Ahi stolta! e darti io stessa
 Volli all’amante riamato? a vita
 Te riserbar, che dai morti a me mille?

(V, 5, vv. 170-173)

In killing Romilda, she simultaneously reclaims her agency and confirms its limits; she possesses the capacity to kill but lacks the ability to control men’s hearts as the former woman can. If the typical Alfierian tyrant is characterized by a paranoiac and impenetrable solitude, Rosmunda, then, is one of the few tyrants who protests most vigorously against it. Such solitude, when looked at through the optics of amorous desire, reveals where her power falls short in being absolute, because she is unable to obtain what she ardently wants. As a result, even Romilda’s death serves to placate only “quasi” her furor. Mario Fubini reads Rosmunda’s hatred, from which her rage stems, as transcending its object, becoming therefore “puro, assoluto, fremebonda ed unica manifestazione di una vita maledetta.”¹⁶² Such hatred, however, might also locate its object in the very mechanisms of the tragedy itself, which delimit Rosmunda’s agency and ultimately frustrate her efforts to exercise total control in her quest to satisfy her amorous desire.

¹⁶¹ Trivero, 73.

¹⁶² Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 218.

In the *Parere sulle tragedie*, Alfieri comments on the complexity of the tragedy's plot, unique to his theater, and which he attributes to the fact that the work's subject matter does not derive from classical precedent:

Mi risulta dal tutto, che questa tragedia è la prima di quattro soli personaggi, in cui all'autore sia riuscito di creare quattro autori diversi tutti, tutti egualmente operanti, agitati tutti da passioni fortissime, che tutte s'incalzano e si urtano e s'incepnan fra loro: e l'azione me ne pare così strettamente connessa, e varia, e raggruppata, e dubbiosa, che sia impossibile il prevederne lo scioglimento.¹⁶³

The other passions around which the tragedy turns, apart from Rosmunda's, are Romilda and Ildovaldo's love for each other, and Almachilde's for Romilda. Almachilde, however, is motivated by a second passion throughout the tragedy: his desire for redemption following the murder of Alboino and his subsequent marriage to Rosmunda. Throughout the tragedy, he expresses remorse for his past crimes and strives to show himself a suitor worthy of Romilda; both acts necessitate his pitiless repudiation of Rosmunda, whom he seeks to punish for her wickedness and manipulation of him. In Act IV, he confesses to Romilda:

Eterna macchia
È Rosmunda al mio nome: al sol vederla,
Entro il mio cor la non sanabil piaga
De' funesti rimorsi, ognor più atroce,
Più insopportabil fassi: e il letto, e il trono,
E l'amor di quell'empia ognor mi rende
(Fin ch'io il divido) agli occhi altrui più reo,
Più vile a' miei.

(3, vv. 211-218)

Almachilde's arc within the tragedy, his complexities of character, and his quest to redeem himself lead Alfieri to evaluate him favorably in the *Parere sulle tragedie*:

Almachilde mi pare un carattere veramente tragico, in quanto egli è colpevole ed innocente quasi ad un tempo; ingiusto ed ingrato per passione, ma giusto e

¹⁶³ Alfieri, *Parere sulle tragedie*, 114.

magnanimo per natura; ed in tutto, e sotto varj aspetti, fortissimamente appassionato sempre, e molto innalzato dall'amor suo.¹⁶⁴

If Romilda has been read as Rosmunda's amorous rival, then Almachilde, given Alfieri's positive appraisal of him and the prominence of the character within the tragic action, becomes the heroine's rival for plot space. His diverse motivations render him nearly as complex as Rosmunda herself; his desire for redemption contrasts with the heroine's for revenge throughout the tragedy, such that the masculine teleology of the tragic genre, according to Teresa de Lauretis and Linda Kintz,¹⁶⁵ threatens to reassert itself and position Almachilde as its principal hero, notwithstanding the fact that the tragedy's name derives from that of its central female protagonist.

It has been noted that *Rosmunda* privileges explorations into the interiority of its heroine; neither of the male characters is granted a soliloquy, and Romilda's single soliloquy pales in comparison to the several which Alfieri gives Rosmunda.¹⁶⁶ In these soliloquies, the heroine expresses her rage, uncertainty, jealousy, and unhappiness, and provides entry into a mind beset by complex and contrasting sentiments. But if the tragedy spotlights Rosmunda's anguished interiority, its representation of her remains nonetheless ambivalent. This ambivalence rears itself most visibly in the tragedy's singular ending in which Rosmunda and Almachilde prepare to spar, weapons drawn. With Romilda slain (and following Ildovaldo's suicide), Almachilde swears to avenge her: "Io vendicarla giuro" (V, 5, v. 180). Rosmunda, for her part, swears to accomplish her vendetta through her consort's dead body: "Ho il ferro ancora; trema: or principia appena / La vendetta, che compiere in te giuro" (V, 5, vv. 181-182). The characters' final lines enact the tension

¹⁶⁴ Alfieri, 114.

¹⁶⁵ See de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, in particular, the chapter "Desire in Narrative," 103-157; and Kintz, *The Subject's Tragedy*, in particular, the chapter "Tragedy as Marriage Strategy: The Story of Oedipus," 29-62.

¹⁶⁶ Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 80.

between oath and oath-breaking earlier seen in *Agamennone* and *Oreste* as well as reinforce that tension's underlying mechanism of desire, since Almachilde seeks revenge on Rosmunda out of love for the murdered Romilda while Rosmunda looks to avenge herself by slaying her unfaithful consort. But if in *Oreste* Clitennestra realizes her desire to perish alongside Egisto, *Rosmunda* concludes with the desires of its two surviving protagonists—both for vengeance—in gridlock.¹⁶⁷ The outcome of the duel has still to be decided, even if the tragedy perhaps hints at Rosmunda's victory by granting her the work's last word. In its violence that makes her Almachilde's equal opponent, her final vindication of agency, moreover, calls for a readjustment to, or a renegotiation of, the gendered parameters of heroism and villainy within Alfierian tragedy. Although the most villainous woman within Alfieri's tragic pantheon, Rosmunda attains for herself an unparalleled measure of agency, even if her claims to this agency do not go uncontested within the tragic action. But in order for this to be achieved, her amorous desire with which the tragedy commences must necessarily metamorphose into a hatred-fueled desire for vengeance by its end. In the Alfierian tragedy which most privileges the thematic of love and amorous desire, ironically, there is very little love to be found at its end. For Rosmunda as a desiring heroine, love becomes a liability in her quest for power and vengeance.

Given the centrality of love to its tragic action, it would appear, then, that with *Rosmunda* Alfieri manages to present a new vision of love liberated from the anxieties troubling and even sidelining his other depictions of love, as in *Filippo*, for example. However, despite the solution of transmuting Rosmunda's thwarted amorous desire into an ultimately ferocious and loveless

¹⁶⁷ Paola Trivero provocatively hypothesizes, not without a measure of optimism, Rosmunda's future following her duel to the death with Almachilde. She argues that the heroine can convincingly be read as "la *dark lady* di una saga (alle *Guerre stellari*, per intenderci) con quella sua promessa di future ritorsioni che lascia il lettore (e perché no lo spettatore? ci auguriamo) a interrogarsi su come proseguirà la storia, su quali saranno le prossime mosse della protagonista di questa tragedia 'terra e feroce'" (Trivero, 85).

passion which culminates in the fatal duel with Almachilde, hints of old anxieties resurface in the tragedy. It has been argued that when the characters, including Rosmunda, speak of love, they do so at times in a Metastasian tenor; they adopt a melodramatic rather than tragic and sublime tone that evokes the sentimentality that Alfieri despised in French tragedy.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, like that of other Alfierian heroines, Rosmunda's love is subversive and not merely sentimental. Through the exercise of her amorous desire, she violently vindicates an autonomy threatened by other characters while also revealing this desire's limitations when she fails to command Almachilde's heart as she once did. Contemporary Italian literary critics questioned the place of love in Italian tragedy and considered it a superfluous plot element. Despite his anxieties, with Rosmunda and other heroines like Isabella, Ottavia, and Clitennestra, Alfieri instead posits love as a central concern of his tragic theater. Rather than superfluous, he makes female amorous desire integral to the unfolding of the tragic plot, a key means by which his heroines renegotiate their participation in the tragic action and resist its attempts to inhibit their agency.

¹⁶⁸ Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 214-215. See also Santato, *Tra mito e palinodia*, 282-283. Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi describe *Rosmunda* as a fragmented tragedy, "insolitamente ricca, nei punti più deboli, di modi melodrammatici: un 'libretto', però, senza musica" (Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 122).

Chapter 4

Transcending Tragedy: Louise Stolberg-Gedern and Alceste

IV.1. The Tragic and Untragic Literary Depiction(s) of Louise Stolberg-Gedern, Countess of Albany

In 1798, after a ten-year hiatus, Alfieri versified *Alceste seconda*. This was his final tragedy, conceived and written after his transfer to Florence from Paris in 1792 and amid the French invasions of the Italian peninsula during the Napoleonic campaigns. It was preceded by his translation into Italian of Euripides' *Alcestis*, which was given the title *Alceste prima*. Alfieri dedicated both tragedies to his longtime companion, Louise Stolberg-Gedern, Countess of Albany, who had already been the subject of numerous lyrics included in the *Rime*, a collection of his poetry. Furthermore, this was not the first tragedy Alfieri dedicated to Louise. In 1786, he dedicated the tragedy *Mirra* to her. In the dedicatory sonnet to the two *Alceste*, Alfieri writes that the selfless and noble female protagonist of both works—Alceste—is a mirror of the countess, while he is represented by the Adméto of his own reworking of Euripides, whom he recast as a passionate and devoted lover. This was a departure from Euripides' decision to portray Admetus as less violently grief-stricken than irascible following the death of his beloved wife. Alfieri concludes the dedicatory sonnet, writing:

Specchio a te stessa e l'una e l'altra Alceste,
Cui dagli Ellénj modi ai Toschi adatto,
Io ti consacro: ultimo don fian queste.

Deh, tregua dando il Tempo al vol suo ratto,
Sorte a me pari al buon Feréte appreste,
S'io nell'un dei due Adméti ho me ritratto!

(vv. 9-14)

Although *Alceste seconda* was Alfieri's final tragedy, Louise had long been a conspicuous presence in his writings, featuring most prominently in the *Vita* and in the *Rime*. She was born in 1752 in Belgium to an aristocratic family of relatively small means. Orphaned at the age of five when her father was killed in battle, she received a modest education in a convent intended for the

daughters of impoverished noble families. In 1772, she was wed to Charles Edward Stuart, the Jacobite pretender to the throne of Great Britain, but the marriage was unhappy due to the latter's alcoholism and temperamental character, in addition to the couple's considerable age difference and Charles Edward's dismal political prospects.¹ In 1777, in Florence, Alfieri encountered Louise for the first time when she was twenty-five, writing in the *Vita* that he was immediately taken with her beauty, described as “un dolce focoso negli occhi nerissimi accoppiatosi (che raro adiviene) con candidissima pelle e biondi capelli.”² Alfieri is quick to add in the *Vita*, however, that Louise's physical charms were coupled with “molta propensione alle bell'arti e alle lettere.”³ It was this combination of physical and intellectual attributes which sealed his attraction to her.⁴

Dedicated to Louise, *Alceste seconda* serves as Alfieri's most detailed, albeit highly idealized, portrait of the countess,⁵ who reappears throughout the *Vita* and is the subject of multiple

¹ For a brief history of Louise and Charles Edward's relationship, see Luisa Ricaldone, “La donna ‘nuova’ e il ‘genio’: per un ritratto di Luisa Stolberg,” in *Alfieri e il suo tempo: Atti del Convegno internazionale, Torino-Asti, 29 novembre – 1 dicembre 2001*, eds. Marco Cerruti, Maria Corsi, and Bianca Danna (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2003), 323-342.

² Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, ed. Luigi Fassò, vol. 1 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1951), 208. Alfieri repeatedly extolls Louise's beauty in verse. In sonnet XIX, written not long after their first encounter in 1777, he bestows ample praise on her eyes and underlines their ability to enrapture him: “Negri, vivaci, e in dolce fuoco ardenti / Occhi, che date a un tempo e morte, e vita; / Siate, ven prega l'alma mia smarrito, / Per breve istante a balenar più lenti” (vv. 1-4).

³ Alfieri, 208.

⁴ In a reevaluation of the countess, Luisa Ricaldone confirms Louise's lifelong passion for reading, her intelligence and vivacity, her interest in a wide range of literature, including Petrarch and Tasso as well as the scientific works of the Comte de Buffon and Pierre-Simon Laplace, all of which rendered her a worthy intellectual companion to the tragedian and would make her an adept salon hostess in Florence after his death in 1803 (Ricaldone, “La donna ‘nuova’ e il ‘genio,’” in *Alfieri e il suo tempo*, 338).

⁵ Paola Trivero writes that *Alceste seconda* becomes for Alfieri “il quadro di un suo *ménage* esemplare” in *Tragiche donne: Tipologie femminili nel teatro del Settecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000) 129. On that note, she adds that among Alfieri's literary portraits of his lovers, in general, “il più statico è quello di Luisa, non scalfito, com'è, dal minimo segno passibile di incrinare l'adamantina perfezione” (Trivero, 130).

lyrics, beginning from around the time of their first meeting in 1777. Louise's importance not only within Alfieri's affections but in relation to his work is revealed in his description of her in the *Vita* as "e sprone e conforto ed esempio ad ogni bell'opera."⁶ Developing this suggestion of Louise as a model as well as inspiration and companion, this analysis examines how Alfieri depicts the countess throughout his writings. Not only does he position Louise as the main female protagonist of the *Vita* and his poetic output, he transforms her into the prototype of the femininity that will characterize Alceste in *Alceste seconda*. While this femininity takes important cues from his tragic heroines, it is also motivated by and dependent on the transcendence of these heroines' tragic condition. This analysis argues that through his idealized depiction of Louise, which anticipates his treatment of Alceste, Alfieri fashions a counterpoint to the complex visions of womanhood offered by his tragedies, a counterpoint which will subsequently be refined in *Alceste seconda*. As Alfieri's most atypical heroine, who models through her mortal sacrifice on behalf of her husband a type of female heroism not seen in his previous tragic women, Alceste cannot be fully understood unless an analysis of her is preceded by an analysis of the woman from whom she is drawn. Because she is the protagonist of multiple works, Louise therefore offers up a way to link together disparate genres within Alfieri's corpus, revealing through her characterization how questions pertaining to tragedy, and, more specifically, Alfierian tragedy's evolving relationship with its heroines, also filter into both the autobiography and *Rime*.

Although he praises Louise as "e sprone e conforto ed esempio ad ogni bell'opera" in the *Vita*, Alfieri only adds the last part of the description in the third and final version of the autobiography, completed just months before his death. Critically, in the second version, developed from a now lost first draft composed likely between 1789-1790 while the tragedian and

⁶ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 209.

countess were living in Paris,⁷ Alfieri simply writes that he found in Louise “sprone ed ajuto.”⁸ This expansion of the countess’s role in Alfieri’s tragic career to include “esempio ad ogni bell’opera” might be seen as a direct reference to the tragedy *Alceste seconda*, largely completed five years earlier in 1798 and for whose heroine Louise served as inspiration.

In the *Vita*, Alfieri puts special emphasis on Louise’s intellect and literary interests in a symmetrical mirroring of his own development as tragedian, the autobiography’s primary objective. As such, to understand Louise’s particular position within the *Vita*, the points at which her characterization conforms to and intersects with the overall goal of Alfieri’s autobiographical project must be taken into consideration. This means, too, that Louise must be read in relation to the women who preceded her in Alfieri’s affections and whose depiction strategically aligns with the author’s representation of his own tragic career.

In the introduction to the *Vita*, Alfieri specifies his intent to write about himself for “l’amore di me medesimo”⁹ and to satisfy the curiosity of admirers of his works interested in the life details of the author himself and who might otherwise obtain an inaccurate picture of him were anyone else to write his biography. Propelled by self-love, he insists that in the *Vita* he will avoid discussing matters beyond his own and decline to name, except in a few, excusable instances, any of the figures who people the autobiography.¹⁰ This intensely restricted focus on the self

⁷ Alfieri, xv. For an overview of the different drafts of the *Vita* prior to its publication in 1806, see also Walter Binni, “Le redazioni della ‘Vita’ alfieriana (1953),” in *Alfieri: Scritti, 1938-1963* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 157-165.

⁸ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, ed. Luigi Fassò, vol. 2 (Asti: Casa d’Alfieri, 1951), 164.

⁹ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, vol. 1, 5.

¹⁰ Alfieri writes: “Non ho intenzione di dar luogo a nessuna di quelle altre particolarità che potranno riguardare altre persone, le di cui peripezie si ritrovassero per così dire intarsiate con le mie; stante che i fatti miei bensì, ma non già gli altrui, mi propongo di scrivere. Non nominerò dunque quasi mai nessuno, individuandone il nome, se non se nelle cose indifferenti o lodevoli” (Alfieri, 7).

corroborates Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vicenza Perdichizzi's assertion that the *Vita* retraces the author's literary vocation, which is inextricably connected with "la storia dell'inconsapevolezza e della ricerca di sé, e insieme della ricerca del vero, definitivo amore."¹¹ This true and definitive love is, of course, Louise Stolberg-Gedern, whose first encounter with Alfieri in the fourth epoch of the *Vita* coincides with the tragedian's literary conversion, the declaration of which commences the portion of the autobiography dedicated to his maturation ("virilità").¹² However, for eighteenth-century reasons of propriety, and in keeping with the autobiography's deliberately narrow visual field, which is tightly and immovably centered on Alfieri, she goes unnamed in the *Vita*, just like the three women and lovers whom she follows.

Yet, as Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi briefly acknowledge, love, and not just Alfieri's self-love, exercises a critical function within the autobiography, becoming a gauge by which the tragedian measures his personal and artistic development against the events of a past that is "già composto e ordinato secondo una linea ben ferma e sicura," in the words of Mario Fubini.¹³ If Louise first appears in the *Vita* in the fourth epoch, corresponding to Alfieri's literary conversion and his conquest of the tragic art, she is also the fourth lover whom the tragedian includes in the autobiography; not only is this neat bit of symmetry designed to align possibly contingent autobiographical events with Alfieri's maturing identification as a tragic author, it also distances Louise from the women who precede her in the *Vita*, resulting in an idealized portrait whose

¹¹ Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vicenza Perdichizzi, *Alfieri* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2018), 217.

¹² Alfieri's youth ends with his conversion to the tragic art at the age of almost twenty-seven, as he states: "Eccomi ora dunque, sendo in età di quasi anni venzette, entrando nel duro impegno e col pubblico e con me stesso, di farmi autor tragico" (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 177).

¹³ Mario Fubini, *Ritratto dell'Alfieri* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967), 50.

numerous qualities reflect more than favorably on the tragedian himself.¹⁴ As for the lovers who come before, their appearance is relegated to the period defined as “giovinezza,” or youth, a decade highlighted by the young Alfieri’s insatiable wanderlust, his general disregard for literature, and his pattern of romanticized amorous escapades.

The women who belong to this decade demonstrate the close affinity between love and study that for Alfieri will reach its apotheosis in Louise. Of his brief affair with Christine Emerentia Leiwe van Aduard, wife of the son of the governor of Batavia and whom he met in the Netherlands in 1768, he writes that he felt awaken in him “un certo desiderio di studi ed un effervescenza d’idee creatrici” that could emerge only in those times in which he felt his heart “fortemente occupato d’amore.”¹⁵ The conclusion of his affair with Christine, however, led to a temporary period of intellectual stagnation, preceded by a swift physical decline and a subsequent suicide attempt,¹⁶ the spirit of which arguably locates echoes, to a certain extent, in Emone’s later rash declarations of self-harm in *Antigone*.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 210-223. The two scholars note that in the *Vita* Alfieri has the autobiography’s other characters conform to the “*carriera intellettuale dello scrittore*” (Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, 220).

¹⁵ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 89. Alfieri’s affair with Christine coincided with his friendship with Don José D’Acunha, the Portuguese ambassador to the Dutch government, who served as an early literary mentor to the young aristocrat and revealed to him the extent of his ignorance of the great Italian poets, writers, and philosophers (including Machiavelli). According to the *Vita*, Alfieri’s appreciation for D’Acunha’s mentorship was strengthened by his heady passion for Christine, which served as an impetus for study.

¹⁶ In the *Vita*, Alfieri writes: “Appena dunque ripatriato, pieno traboccante il cuore di malinconia e d’amore, io mi sentiva una necessità assoluta di fortemente applicare la mente in un qualche studio; ma non sapeva il quale, stante che la trascurata educazione coronata poi da quei circa sei anni di ozio e di dissipazione, mi avea fatto egualmente incapace di ogni studio qualunque” (Alfieri, 92-93).

¹⁷ In Act IV, scene 2, Emone passionately interrogates Creonte after the latter has Antigone arrested:

Vuoi dunque
Perder tuo figlio tu?... Ch’io sopravviva
A lei, nè un giorno, invan lo speri. È poco

Alfieri's description of this first affair, however, lacks the insistence on the dichotomy he will establish between worthy and unworthy lovers in his account of his subsequent relationships. He caps the narrative of his affair with the English aristocrat Penelope Pitt with the shocking discovery of her liaison with a jockey. In the infamous episode, one of the most romanesque in the *Vita*, Alfieri recalls that Penelope confessed her intimacy with her husband's jockey and admitted that she was unworthy of the young Alfieri as a result:

Finalmente con grave e lungo stento, previo un doloroso proemio interrotto da sospiri e singhiozzi amarissimi, ella mi veniva dicendo che sapea purtroppo non poter essere in conto nessuno omai degna di me; e che io non la dovea né poteva né vorrei sposar mai... perché già prima... di amar me... ella avea amato... “E chi mai?” soggiungeva io interrompendo con impeto. “Un *jockey*” (cioè un palafreniere) “che stava... in casa... di mio marito.”¹⁸

As in the case of his first relationship, the failure of the affair with Penelope brings on for Alfieri another persistent bout of melancholy, which coincides with his continued ignorance of Italian literature and inability to devote himself consistently to worthwhile intellectual pursuits. Nonetheless, in keeping with the autobiography's overall move toward his literary conversion, Alfieri writes that despite his melancholy resulting from “sì feroce borrasca,”¹⁹ signs of his inevitable embrace of literature and the tragic genre can be found in the purchase made soon after in Paris of a thirty-six volume set of the works of the principal Italian poets and prose writers. Although Alfieri confesses to his then general unfamiliarity with many of the authors included in

Perdere il figlio; a mille danni incontro
Tu vai.

(vv. 53-56)

¹⁸ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 120.

¹⁹ Alfieri, 123.

the collection,²⁰ the juxtaposition of this purchase with the account of his affair with Penelope, which immediately precedes it, is further evidence of the precise imbrication of events within the *Vita* through which Alfieri both endows his amorous relationships with added intellectual significance and reinforces the interdependence of love and his literary endeavors, a central but often underappreciated theme in the autobiography.

If the lovers who precede Louise Stolberg-Gedern in the *Vita* are meant to contrast unfavorably with the woman whom Alfieri will go on to describe as his “degnò amore,”²¹ then, Gabriella Falletti di Villafalletto makes for the most extreme contrast. The appearance of the “odiosamata Signora,”²² a married noblewoman with a dubious reputation in Alfieri’s aristocratic circles and with whom he engaged in a tempestuous affair, coincides with the nadir of his slothful and artistically unproductive existence. He directly associates this intellectually torpid period with his last unworthy amorous relationship, writing: “Vegetando io dunque così in questa vita giovanile oziosissima, non avendo mai un istante quasi di mio, né mai aprendo più un libro di sorte nessuna, incappai (come ben dovea essere) di bel nuovo in un tristo amore.”²³ The failure of this relationship, as with his previous affairs, had severe psychosomatic consequences for Alfieri,²⁴ but

²⁰ Alfieri’s ignorance turns to amazement in his account: “Tuttavia, così per ozio e per noja, squadernando alla sfuggita que’ miei trentasei volumetti mi maravigliai del gran numero di rimatori che in compagnia dei nostri quattro sommi poeti erano stati collocati a far numero; gente, di cui (tanta era la mia ignoranza) io non avea mai neppure udito il nome; ed erano: un *Torracchione*, un *Morgante*, un *Ricciardetto*, un *Orlandino*, un *Malmantile*, e che so io; poemi, dei quali molti anni dopo deplorai la triviale facilità, e la fastidiosa abbondanza” (Alfieri, 125).

²¹ Alfieri, 206.

²² Alfieri, 145.

²³ Alfieri, 138.

²⁴ The tragedian describes an acute stomach complaint that left him in convulsions and unable to eat or drink for days. The sudden illness, which he viewed as a psychosomatic reaction to his relationship with Gabriella, made him despondent: “La rabbia, la vergogna, e il dolore, in cui mi faceva sempre vivere quell’indegno amore, mi aveano cagionata quella signora malattia. Ed io, non vedendo strada per me di

it also marked the beginning of his conversion to the tragic genre, since his first tragedy, the subsequently repudiated *Antonio e Cleopatra*, was written during this time but staged only after he had definitively ended his relationship with the marchioness.²⁵ In the *Vita*, Alfieri attributes his desire to become a tragedian to seeing his work performed for the first time in Turin in June 1775.²⁶

Thus the third epoch of the *Vita*, dedicated to Alfieri's youth, ends with the author free from his least dignified amorous relationship and having composed his first tragedy, whose failure on an artistic level will only spur his application to his literary studies as well as his efforts to refine his approach to the tragic genre in the fourth epoch. The stage is therefore set for the arrival of the countess in whom Alfieri finds the perfect amorous complement to his literary pursuits. The praise he bestows on Louise makes reference to the less worthy women who came before her:

Avvistomi in capo a due mesi che la mia vera donna era quella, poiché invece di ritrovare in essa, come in tutte le volgari donne, un ostacolo alla gloria letteraria, un disturbo alle utili occupazioni, ed un rimpicciolimento direi di pensieri, io ci ritrovava e sprone e conforto ed esempio ad ogni bell'opera; io, conosciuto e apprezzato un sì raro tesoro, mi diedi allora perdutissimamente a lei.²⁷

If the labored birth and development of *Antonio e Cleopatra* represents Alfieri's tragic apprenticeship, the inauspicious start of an ultimately fecund period of artistic creation, the three

uscire di quel sozzo laberinto, sperai, e desiderai di morirne" (Alfieri, 140). Alfieri would experience similarly intense psychosomatic episodes throughout his life as a response to emotional shock. For example, when his friend Tommaso Valperga di Caluso sprained his wrist during a trip to visit Alfieri and Louise in Alsace in 1787, the tragedian fell ill with an extreme bout of dysentery that lasted over two weeks. Additionally, the death of his closest friend Francesco Gori Gandellini in 1784 and the frequent separations from Louise during the 1780s, led to periods of intense, sometimes debilitating, depression.

²⁵ Alfieri repudiated this tragedy as a sophomoric effort, the fruit of artistic inspiration lacking wholly in intellectual rigor and hampered by his ignorance of the Italian language. In so doing, he further dissociates his tragic conversion from his affair with Gabriella.

²⁶ "Ma, da quella fatal serata in poi, mi entrò in ogni vena un sì fatto bollire e furore di conseguire un giorno meritatamente una vera palma teatrale, che non mai febbre alcuna di amore mi avea con tanta impetuosità assalito" (Alfieri, 152).

²⁷ Alfieri, 209.

women who precede the countess in the *Vita* constitute the tragedian's amorous schooling from which he will graduate with his felicitous choice of Louise and subsequent devotion to her. In the countess, Alfieri finds not only an emotional but an intellectual helpmeet.²⁸ The solipsistic quality of the autobiography, which earlier facilitated the transformation of his three previous lovers into a mirror of his own youthful indiscretions and intellectual passivity, now enables Louise to be seen as a reflection of his own mental and artistic maturity.

In the fourth epoch, parallel to Alfieri's conquest of tragic style following his literary conversion, is his quest to obtain domestic stability and happiness with the countess. The account of his tragic output from the late 1770s through the 1780s is punctuated by descriptions of his repeated separations from and reunions with Louise, whose position as a socially and politically conspicuous married noblewoman after her separation from Charles Edward necessitated her frequent relocation to avoid scandal. Alfieri uses language reminiscent of his political treatises and tragedies in order to describe the Jacobite pretender as barbarous and his conjugal union with the countess as a tyranny. He recounts the final domestic altercation between the couple, which occurred on 30 November 1780; the violence on the part of the likely inebriated Charles Edward forced Louise to seek out "un modo per sottrarsi a sì fatta tirannia, e salvare la salute e la vita."²⁹ Alfieri assisted the countess in her flight. In his account, she assumes the dimensions of one of his more seemingly passive tragic heroines, perhaps Isabella, while he takes on those of his young, infatuated tragic heroes such as Carlo:

²⁸ See Ricaldone, "La donna 'nuova' e il 'genio'," in *Alfieri e il suo tempo*, 323-342. Referring to Alfieri's initial description of the countess in the *Vita*, Ricaldone writes: "Ma è la 'molta propensione alle bell'arti e alle lettere' l'aspetto su cui Alfieri pare fondare il proprio interessamento per Luisa e che, insolito fino a quel momento nel suo quadro esperienziale, si rivelerà, nel corso del tempo, una componente decisiva nella loro relazione d'amore" (Ricaldone, 332).

²⁹ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 222.

Mi basti il dire, che io salvai la donna mia dalla tirannide d'un irragionevole e sempre ubriaco padrone, senza che pure vi fosse in nessunissimo modo compromessa la di lei onestà, né leso nella minima parte il decoro di tutti. Il che certamente a chiunque ha saputo o viste dappresso le circostanze particolari della prigionia durissima in cui ella di continuo ad oncia ad oncia moriva, non parrà essere stata così facile a ben condursi, e riuscirla, come pure riuscì a buon esito.³⁰

Through the intervention of her brother-in-law, the cardinal Henry Benedict Stuart, the countess was eventually able to shelter in an Ursuline monastery in Rome, beginning in early January 1781. Three months later, she was successful in obtaining a license from the pope which allowed her to leave the monastery; her separation from Charles Edward was also recognized. But despite her subsequent move into an apartment in Rome, Alfieri, aware of the delicate situation in which both he and the countess continued to find themselves, resisted joining her in the city for a couple months, prompting him to reflect in hindsight that “i contrasti che prova un cuor tenero ed onorato fra l'amore e il dovere, sono la più terribile e mortal passione ch'uomo possa mai sopportare.”³¹ This dichotomy between love and an aristocratic sense of duty and the emotional anguish to which it gives rise reappear throughout Alfieri's account of the various separations he and the countess were made to endure until the death of Charles Edward in 1788 finally permitted the couple to cohabit. It will return in *Alceste seconda* where in the hero Admèto's suicide attempt by starvation after Alceste's presumed death, Alfieri demonstrates its fatal nature. In the tragedian's revision of Euripides, Alceste's desire that Admèto remain living for the sake of their children is ignored as the hero subordinates duty to love, yielding to his intense devotion to his wife in order to reunite with her in death.³²

³⁰ Alfieri, 222-223.

³¹ Alfieri, 226.

³² Other Alfierian heroes suffer a similarly intense amorous passion that conflicts with other obligations. For example, Emone must decide between loyalty to his father, the tyrant Creonte, and his desire for Antigone. Peréo, for his part, refuses to accept anything less than Mirra's reciprocated love, unwilling to

Ingratiating himself with the Roman elite and prelates so as to maintain an unquestioned presence in the city, Alfieri was eventually able to establish himself in Rome in May 1781 and frequently visit Louise without taint of suspicion.³³ The two years that he spent in Rome in the company of the countess were particularly fertile, as he revised or brought to completion a number of tragic works, composed the tragedies *Merope* and *Saul*, the latter of which he originally intended to have close his tragic career, saw the recitation of *Antigone*, and organized the first printing of four tragedies (*Filippo*, *Polinice*, *Antigone*, and *Virginia*). However, after a sudden illness convinced Charles Edward to pay more attention to the affairs of his wife in Rome,³⁴ Alfieri found his position in the city no longer tenable and departed for Siena. In the *Vita*, he writes that this separation from the countess, although one of many, was the “più terribile per me, essendo ogni speranza di rivederla pur troppo incerta e lontana.”³⁵ Moreover, this removal from Rome served to disrupt his studies, confirming once more the countess’s positive influence and the synergetic relationship he establishes between love and intellectual pursuits throughout the *Vita*. Of his separation from Louise he writes: “Questo avvenimento mi tornò a scomporre il capo per forse

wed the reluctant bride despite the potential political fallout from their thwarted nuptials. Both heroes commit suicide.

³³ Although not without some bitterness, Alfieri humorously describes this truckling to the moral demands of the Roman prelates as a sacrifice made out of love: “Appena giuntovi, addottrinato ed ispirato dalla Necessità e da Amore, diedi proseguimento e compimento al già intrapreso corso di pieghevolezze e astuziole cortigianesche per pure abitare la stessa città e vedervi l’adorata donna. Onde dopo tante smanie, fatiche, e sforze per farmi libero, mi trovai trasformato ad un tratto in uomo visitante, riverenziante, e piaggiante in Roma, come un candidato che avrebbe postulato inoltrarsi nella prelatura” (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 226).

³⁴ For an extended account of the circumstances surrounding Louise’s flight to Rome and her relationship with both her husband and brother-in-law, see Alfred von Reumont, “Gli ultimi Stuardi, la contessa d’Albany e Vittorio Alfieri,” *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Serie Quarta, 8, vol. 124 (1881): 65-104, www.jstor.org/stable/44453947.

³⁵ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 237.

due anni, e m'impedì, ritardò e guastò anche notabilmente sotto ogni aspetto i miei studi."³⁶ In another concrete proof of the countess's impact on his tragic output, Alfieri composed *Maria Stuarda* based on her suggestion, versifying the work in 1780, while she was still living with Charles Edward.³⁷ Finally, it was to Louise that he also dedicated *Mirra*, which he versified in 1786.

The pattern of separations and reunions which characterizes Alfieri's relationship with Louise until her husband's death in 1788, is one of the central motifs of the author's lyric production. In the *Rime*, which in its two parts gathers together poems composed between 1776 and 1798,³⁸ Alfieri gives ample vent to his emotional anguish and melancholy following his frequent partings from the countess, and transforms her into the collection's central female protagonist. The *Rime* have typically been viewed as a bridge between the *Vita* and tragedies.³⁹ Indeed, Alfieri explores in many lyrics the unhappiness and intellectual torpor about which he

³⁶ Alfieri, 237.

³⁷ Alfieri, 219.

³⁸ Only the first part of the *Rime* was printed during Alfieri's lifetime; this collection, spanning poems composed between 1776 and 1789, initially formed part of the group of works the author had printed at Kehl between 1787-1789. The second part, instead, appeared posthumously in 1804 with the assistance of the Countess of Albany, who tasked Alfieri's secretary, Francesco Tassi, with readying his unpublished works for printing. For an overview of the somewhat circuitous publication history of the *Rime*, see the introduction to Alfieri, *Rime*, ed. Francesco Maggini (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1954), ix-xxvii. For an analysis of how Alfieri's approach to composing the *Rime* relates to eighteenth-century Italian practices of reading Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, see Manlio Pastore Stocchi, "Alfieri e la forma-canzoniere," in *Annali Alfieriani della Fondazione Centro di Studi Alfieriani*. "Alfieri e Petrarca." *Atti della Giornata di studio (Padova, 7 novembre 2002)*, eds. Guido Santato and Gianfranco Bettin, vol. 8 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 2005), 23-35.

³⁹ Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1958), 179. See also Vittore Branca, *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile con cinque nuovi studi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1981), 108; and Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994* (Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2015), 117. Binni writes: "In realtà le *Rime*, mentre costituiscono un complemento essenziale dell'autobiografia dell'Alfieri, hanno un valore più profondo, esprimendo anche elementi essenziali della sua intuizione e della sua esperienza drammatica della vita" (Binni, 117). Mario Fubini, *pace* Ramat, characterizes the *Rime* as Alfieri's "diario rimato" (Fubini, *Ritratto dell'Alfieri*, 66).

writes in the *Vita*, where he places love on an equal level with, and not subordinated to, artistic achievement. In the autobiography, he writes: “La mia infelicità proveniva soltanto dal bisogno, anzi necessità ch’era in me di avere ad un tempo stesso il cuore occupato da un degno amore, e la mente da un qualche nobile lavoro.”⁴⁰ This same spirit carries over in multiple sonnets.

In sonnet XLVI, Alfieri associates forced separation from Louise with a lack of productivity. His intellectual efforts conclude in tears: “Or temo, or bramo, or vado, or penso, or scrivo; / Ma il fin di tutto è ognor di pianto un rivo, / Voler, poi disvoler, nè aver mai loco” (vv. 6-8). Written during the aftermath of Louise’s departure for Rome following her separation from Charles Edward in 1780, the sonnet expresses a series of contradictions indicative not only of the author’s incapacity to write but, so too, his mental disorientation; he fears and yearns in almost the same breath, muses then writes, wants then spurns, vacillating between resolve and near emotional collapse in the absence of his lover.

However, even his reunion with the countess fails to alleviate the psychological instability caused by their frequent separations. In sonnet CXIX, composed in August 1784, Alfieri couples joy and terror, sentiments inextricably linked during this period of recurrent domestic upheaval. He writes that his anticipated happiness at reuniting with Louise is accompanied by the terror provoked by the thought of their future and inevitable parting:

Ecco ch’io lieto, ora, se il fui giammai,
 Esser dovrei; poichè vieppiù mi appresso
 A chi pur tanto sospirando andai,
 E in cui mia speme e vita e gloria ho messo.
 E or pur mi assal, senza ch’io tor mel possa,
 Nuovo un terror che me la pinga inferma;
 E me ne scorre il brivido per l’ossa.
 Ma d’onde il so? la sconsolata ed erma
 Vita ch’io meno, ogni fantasma ingrossa;
 Nè dal troppo sentir senno mi scherma.

⁴⁰ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 72.

(vv. 5-14)

Louise's importance both as an emotional and intellectual companion to Alfieri is evident in the latter's assertion that he hinges his professional glory as well as his hopes and life on her. Moreover, in the dichotomy it establishes between "senno" and "troppo sentir," the closing verse intensifies the previous sonnet's suggestion of mental fragility; the author's reason is incapable of preventing the emotional fraying which results from memories of previous separations and the fear of new ones.

In sonnet CXXI, the memory of Alfieri's most difficult parting from the countess, his departure from Rome on 4 May 1783, is specifically evoked; in the wake of this separation from Louise, which offered little guarantee of reunion, he recalls his disinterest in obtaining literary fame and again demonstrates the essential role exercised by love in his conception and personal valorization of his intellectual pursuits: "Ma un morir lento era la vita mia; / Il mio poco intelletto, e il gran desire / D'acquistare alta fama in me languia" (vv. 9-11). In the dedicatory sonnet to *Mirra*, composed during this same period in which domestic stability with the countess was still far from ensured, Alfieri tellingly consecrates Mirra's sorrow to Louise. Despite the incestuous nature of Mirra's passion, it no doubt struck a chord with the couple, who still could not live together for reasons of social propriety. Indeed, Alfieri recalls in the dedicatory sonnet that the "l'orrendo a un tempo ed innocente amore" (v. 10) of Mirra brought tears to Louise's eyes.⁴¹

In the *Rime*, an explicit tribute to Alfieri's "donna" can be found in sonnet CXXXVIII, composed like the previous lyrics during the mid-1780s. In this sonnet, Louise is a concrete and sustained presence notwithstanding the fact that the poem deals with her absence and its mental and emotional consequences for the author. She is not merely, as Raffaello Ramat would perhaps

⁴¹ For Alfieri, these tears are proof that he should dedicate the tragedy *Mirra* to Louise: "Prova emmi questa, che al mio dubbio core / Tacitamente imperiosa dice; / Ch'io di Mirra consacri a te il dolore" (vv. 12-14).

insist, a pretense for loftier considerations⁴²; instead, she becomes the linchpin for Alfieri's intellectual development and psychological wellbeing. If in this poetic depiction and homage she takes on a spectral function by reflecting the author's melancholy, she resists completely transforming into a metaphor through the sonnet's multiple doublings ("sazio," "stanco"; "privo di lei," "privo d'intelletto," "senno," "virtude"; "lingua," "petto") and repeated emphasis on lack. Her absence both signifies Alfieri's sense of personal incompleteness and signals a sort of loss that could only point to the tangible existence of a beloved woman:

Fin ch'io mi stava di mia donna al fianco,
 Mi porgean l'alme suore alto diletto
 Nè mai di apprender sazio era, nè stanco.
 Privo di lei, son privo d'intelletto;
 Ogni senno e virtude in me vien manco,
 "Pien di *malinconia* la lingua e il petto."

(vv. 9-14)

Alfieri's poetic relationship to Petrarch has been frequently addressed in critical evaluations of the *Rime*.⁴³ This relationship ranges from superficial thematic borrowings, such as in the repeated references to Louise's black eyes and golden hair,⁴⁴ to a highly personalized

⁴² Raffaello Ramat argues that critics have often misguidedly concentrated on the amorous thematic of the *Rime* and failed to realize how love for Alfieri is "in funzione d'un altro sentimento più profondo e vasto e dominante," that is, his sense of aristocratic alienation from contemporary society. According to Ramat, this alienation led to Alfieri's deeply interiorized reflections on the self and his intense pursuit of artistic glory as a means by which to rise above his degraded epoch (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 177). Ramat reduces love in Alfieri's lyric production to an element from which the author arrives at a greater and transcendent meaning (Ramat, 205). In so doing, Ramat overlooks how love, of which the countess is the greatest representative, is not for Alfieri simply a sentimental gateway to more profound examinations of the self; instead, it is an integral component of his understanding of both himself and his literary output, without which artistic creation becomes impossible.

⁴³ For an insightful study on Alfieri's evolving relationship to Petrarch, see Vincenza Perdichizzi, "Le 'Rime' alfieriane e il 'Canzoniere' petrarchesco," *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana* 35, no. 2 (May-August 2006): 27-50, www.jstor.org/stable/23937819.

⁴⁴ See, for example, sonnet XXII in which Alfieri has Love point out to him "costei, / Che negro ardente ha l'occhio, ed auro il crine" (vv. 10-11), or sonnet XXIV in which the poet rapturously lists Louise's physical charms: "Tu sei, tu sei pur dessa: amate forme, / Deh, come pinte al vivo! Ecco il vermiglio / Labro, il

metabolization of Petrarchan self-reflection.⁴⁵ Manlio Pastore Stocchi writes that Alfieri's modeling of the *Rime* on the *Canzoniere* ultimately represents a misreading of Petrarch's existential project in its favoring of the work's amorous thematic and in its insistence on abolishing "la distanza, così essenziale in Petrarca, tra l'occasione lontana dei testi e il momento della loro rimessa in opera."⁴⁶

negr'occhio, il sen che vince il giglio, / D'ogni alto mio pensier le amate norme" (vv. 1-4). Both sonnets were composed when Alfieri was in the initial stages of his passion for the countess. Louise's Petrarchan beauty returns, however, in a more sober form in sonnet LV, composed in 1784 after the couple's painful separation in Rome the year prior. In this sonnet, the countess's famous black eyes both instill love in the poet and communicate her intellectual and emotional capabilities: "Chi in sì barbaro modo hammi diviso / Dalla dolce fontana di mia vita? / Da' bei negri occhi, che il mio cor conquiso / Hanno, e la mente d'ogni error guarita?" (vv. 7-8).

⁴⁵ Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 118-119.

⁴⁶ Pastore Stocchi, "Alfieri e la forma-canzoniere," 31. Although Pastore Stocchi observes that this misreading was common among eighteenth-century admirers of Petrarch, for Alfieri it led to his poetic output's powerful sense of immediacy and its adoption of love, specifically for Louise, as its unifying theme. However, despite the shared misreading of Petrarch on the part of Alfieri and other eighteenth-century authors, Alfieri's idiosyncratic uptake of the Trecento poet radically departs from early eighteenth-century Arcadian sensibilities in its links to tragedy (Pastore Stocchi, 30-31). Many of Alfieri's verses often toggle between expressions of Petrarchan idealism and effusions of tragic sentiment. On the relationship of Alfieri's lyric production to tragedy, see Perdichizzi, "Le 'Rime' alfieriane," 33, 37-38; Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 121; and Branca, *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile*, 69. The lurid violence characterizing the depiction of love in sonnet CLXXII is just one example of Alfieri's particular blend of the tragic and lyric, which here takes on a Dantean intensity:

Tante, sì spesse, sì lunghe, sì orribili
 Percosse or dammi iniquamente Amore,
 Che i mie' martiri omai fatti insoffribili
 Mi van traendo appien del senno fuore,
 Or (cieca scorta) odo il mio sol furore;
 E d'un pestifero angue ascolto i sibili,
 Che mi addenta, e mi attosca e squarcia il cuore
 In modi mille, oltre ogni dir terribili
 Or, tra ferri e veleni, e avelli ed ombre,
 La negra fantasia piena di sangue
 Le vie tutte di morte hammi disgombrare:
 Or piango, e strido; indi, qual corpo esangue,
 Giaccio immobile; un velo atro m'ha ingombre
 Le luci; e sto, qual chi morendo langue

(vv. 1-14)

Alfieri's references to Louise in the first part of the *Rime* have been criticized for their physiognomic blandness, a consequence of the author's unsuccessful attempt to raise Louise to the status of Petrarch's Laura.⁴⁷ However, in the second part of the *Rime*, composed following Alfieri's relocation to Florence along with the countess in 1792 and spanning nearly the entire decade, this arguably indistinctive praise of Louise gives way, as Giuseppe Nicoletti insists, to more intense self-examinations prompted by Alfieri's fear of mortality and the loss of his lover.⁴⁸ In sonnet LI, written in 1795, Alfieri gives lyrical expression to his recurrent preoccupation with either predeceasing the countess or being forced to live on after her death⁴⁹:

Donna, s'io sol di me cura prendessi,
 Pur di sottrarmi ai dì solinghi pago,
 Forse avveria che voti al Ciel porgessi,
 Di premorirti ardentemente vago.
 Ma quando (ove tu a me sopravvivessi)
 Quella tua vita entro al futuro indago,
 Tremendi allor mi fa di Cloto i messi
 La tua dolente scompagnata immago.
 Vogl'io perciò ver l'alte sfere il volo
 Vederti sciorre, ed io quaggiù senz'alma
 Restar piangendo, orribilmente solo?
 Morte di un sol di noi non avrà palma;
 D'entrambi a un tempo a lei daralla il duolo:
 Sola un'anima siam, sola una salma.

(vv. 1-14)

⁴⁷ Mario Fubini argues that in the sonnets dedicated to Louise, the countess lacks a certain "fisionomia poetica" and therefore fails to achieve the same universal stature of Petrarch's Laura (Fubini, *Ritratto dell'Alfieri*, 65-66). Walter Binni agrees, noting that in Alfieri's early lyric production, routinely inspired by his love for Louise, the poetic results appear "incerti" and their vision of satisfied passion "poco alfieriana" (Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 120).

⁴⁸ Giuseppe Nicoletti, "Dalla 'fonte delle rime' alfieriane: I sonetti fiorentini della 'Parte seconda,'" in *Alfieri in Toscana: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Firenze, 19-20-21 ottobre 2000*, eds. Gino Tellini and Roberta Turchi, vol. 1 (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 233.

⁴⁹ For a longer analysis of this critical thematic in Alfieri's lyric production, see Clara Leri, "'All'orlo della vita'. Il tempo nelle 'Rime' di Vittorio Alfieri," *Lettere italiane* 54, no. 2 (April-June 2002): 210-241, www.jstor.org/stable/26266655.

Alfieri's fears of loss were likely amplified by the premature physical decline he experienced during the 1790s⁵⁰ and the worsening political situation in the Italian peninsula, which culminated in the French invasions of 1796 and 1799. In sonnet LXVIII, composed amid his fervent study of ancient Greek and just a couple weeks after he had laid out in prose the first act of his version of Euripides' *Alcestis* in May 1798,⁵¹ he reiterates the sentiment of the previous sonnet but infuses it with a more charged tragic dynamism. Accusing Fate of having condemned him to physical decrepitude and (relative) poverty, he next addresses the "tre strali" which his adverse destiny has launched at him:

L'onor piagato, che di morte è scoglio;
 Libertà, non che tolta, anco scemata;
 E di perder mia Donna il fier cordoglio.

(vv. 9-11)

In the sonnet's concluding tercet, two cornerstones of Alfierian tragedy—liberty and honor—are united with another major theme of Alfieri's literary output: love, which in his poetry becomes an intense, limitless, and deeply individualized sentiment, central to the psychic conflicts which predominate in many of his lyrics' numerous self-examinations.⁵² In his adamant resolve not to outlive the countess, Alfieri suggests the importance of love not only as a principal thematic of the *Rime*, whose genre anticipates its heavy presence, but also in questions related to tragedy:

All'onor sopravvivere, bennata

⁵⁰ Nicoletti, "Dalla 'fonte delle rime' alfieriane," in *Alfieri in Toscana*, 233.

⁵¹ "Finalmente venne quel giorno, nel maggio '98, in cui mi si accese talmente la fantasia su questo soggetto che giunto a casa dalla passeggiata, mi posi a stenderla, e scrissi d'un fiato il primo atto, e ci scrissi in margine: 'Steso con furore maniaco, e lagrime molte'; e nei giorni susseguenti stesi con eguale impeto gli altri quattr'atti, e l'abbozzo dei cori, ed anche quella prosa che serve di schiarimento, e il tutto fu terminato il di 26 maggio, e così sgravatomi di quel sì lungo e sì ostinato parto, ebbi pace" (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 309). The spirit of his initial approach to *Alceste seconda* seems to color the sonnets which adopt themes similar to those of Euripides' tragedy.

⁵² Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 121.

Alma nol deggio: a Libertà, nol voglio:
Non posso sopravvivere all'Amata.

(vv. 12-14)

With his slow but steady physical deterioration, and amid political disappointments not entirely mitigated by his classical studies,⁵³ Alfieri projects an elegiac vision of love in which death is not defiantly sought as a rebuke of tyranny, as in his earlier political tragedies; instead, it becomes a sort of compromise for the tragedian ill-disposed to outlive his lover whose companionship is integral to his wellbeing. The entire sonnet is pervaded by a yearning for domestic stability and comforts foreign to Alfieri's tragic literary production. Despite their recurrent consonance with Alfierian tragedy, the *Rime* propose a vision of love that transcends its tragic associations, with Louise representing for Alfieri the fulfillment of the emotional intimacy and domestic stability routinely undermined in his tragedies. In these tragedies, in which female heroines are generally the dominant players within the tragic action, the catastrophe results from the violent overturning of love and the related intimations of domestic bliss. In Alfieri's lyrics, love and domestic bliss are championed, threatened by fears of loss and death but never obliterated. On a thematic level, the *Rime* and Alfierian tragedy thus share an inverse relationship: what is, by generic constraint, merely suggested or intimated in the tragedies (i.e. love, domestic harmony, familial cohesion), is intimately explored in the *Rime*; and, by that token, what become catastrophizing forces in the tragedies (i.e. separation, death, and even infidelity), are transformed into menaces in the *Rime* that ultimately never manage to subvert the lyrics' domestic aspirations.

⁵³ For a look at how Alfieri's political and cultural hatred of the French, which only intensified during their invasions of the Italian peninsula, colored his practice of annotating classical works, see Clara Domenici's prodigious study, *La biblioteca classica di Vittorio Alfieri* (Milan: Nino Aragno, 2013).

The *Rime*'s decidedly untragic portrait of Louise is perhaps best exemplified by sonnet XX, composed in 1778 in the early years of Alfieri's relationship with the countess. In this lyric, Alfieri portrays an intimate emotional reciprocity communicated through a physiological code that transcends language:

S'io t'amo? oh donna! io nol diria volendo.
 Voce esprimer può mai quanta m'inspiri
 Dolcezza al cor, quando pietosa giri
 Ver me tue luci, ove alti sensi apprendo?
 S'io t'amo? E il chiedi? e nol dich'io tacendo?
 E non tel dicon miei lunghi sospiri;
 E l'alma afflitta mia, che par che spiri,
 Mentre dal tuo bel ciglio immobil pendo?
 E non tel dice ad ogni istante il pianto,
 Cui di speranza e di temenza misto,
 Versare a un tempo, e raffrenare io bramo?
 Tutto tel dice in me: mia lingua intanto
 Sola tel tace, perchè il cor s'è avvisto,
 Ch'a quel ch'ei sente, è un nulla il dirti: Io t'amo.

(vv. 1-14)

The modernity of the sonnet lies in its unmistakable emotional immediacy; Alfieri admits his love for Louise through physical gestures that do not require the mediation of language. His sighs, beleaguered breaths, tears, and telling silences, the typical signs of an enamored man or woman, take on a new intensity because they are not studied but, instead, escape him involuntarily. The sonnet's intimacy, made clear in the lyrical emphasis on Alfieri's body, is also conveyed in the poem's suggestion of the emotional mutuality that Alfieri and Louise share. Although the sonnet rhetorically asks how the countess could misunderstand the gestures through which Alfieri confesses his love, it simultaneously implies that the two lovers have access to the same physiological code through which to communicate meaning perceptible to them alone. This is confirmed in the sonnet which serves as a pendant to sonnet XX. In sonnet XXI, written just seven days after the preceding lyric, Alfieri describes a similar process through which Louise admits her

love for the poet without explicitly stating it: “Deh come dolce amorosetta guardi! / Oh qual ne’ tuoi begli occhi Amor fa gioco!” (vv. 5-6). This emotional reciprocity is developed over the course of the *Rime*.

Commenting on Alfieri’s amorous lyrics, Walter Binni writes that they achieve their greatest poetic value when they describe a beloved object that is

lontano e irraggiungibile, mèta di tensione, stimolo di tormento, coefficiente di infelicità, oggetto bramato ed ideale a contrasto con una realtà tediosa, luminoso, arduo simbolo di un valore a contrasto con il mondo mediocre e vile in cui il poeta è costretto a vivere.⁵⁴

Binni correctly identifies how the amorous element of Alfieri’s lyric output often sees Arcadian sweetness exchanged for penetrating reflections on loss and the poet’s own internal struggles. Yet Alfieri juxtaposes to this tendency of his poems toward extreme interiorization another tendency toward exteriorization. This second tendency is exemplified by the countess and, in particular, by the emotional and intellectual capacities which make her more than a worthy match for the tragedian. In sonnet CXXVIII, composed in 1784, Alfieri muses on the reciprocal nature of their relationship, which has only been strengthened by their many trials and separations:

Deh! perdona: ben sento; era a noi forza
 Restar, per altri quattro mesi o sei,
 Divisi; e un po’ dar tregua ai denti rei
 D’invidia, che del pianto altrui si ammorza.
 Ben sento; anco tu stessa a viva forza
 Dal tuo fido amator, donna, ti sei
 Strappata; e i tuoi sospiri erano i miei;
 Che de’ duo nostri cori una è la scorza.
 Del rio destino, e non di te, mi doglio:
 Poichè in tutto mi avanzi, anco in coraggio
 Per mia norma pigliarti unica voglio.

(vv. 1-11)

⁵⁴ Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 120.

Alfieri, who highly values courage in both his tragedies and political treatises, admiringly observes that in the face of their latest separation the countess's courage surpasses even his own, to the point that he wants to adopt Louise as his model, or "norma." Elsewhere he portrays her as his equal when it comes to depth of feeling. Her sighs are his sighs; her heart is sheathed in the same hide as his.

In another lyric, sonnet CXLVII, written the following year, the poet's dependence on his lover reoccurs as a theme, but there is also a marked insistence on the emotional and intellectual guidance she alone is capable of offering him:

Donna mia, poco son; ma nulla io fora,
 Se fra il cieco bollor de' pensier miei,
 Te non avessi per mia scorta ognora.
 Anco lontana, al fianco mio tu sei:
 Spiacerti io temo: e al ben oprar m'incuora
 L'amor tuo, di cui privo, io non vivrei.

(vv. 9-14)

This depiction of Louise as more than just a muse returns in the second part of the *Rime*, in a sonnet composed in March 1789 when Alfieri was still overseeing the difficult work of readying his works for printing at Kehl. In sonnet IV, the tragedian describes his efforts as "lento, steril, penoso, prosciugante / Lavoro ingrato" (vv. 1-2), before redirecting his attention to the countess:

Deh, come mai spender tant'ore e tante
 In ciascun dì fra' stenti tuoi potrei,
 Se poi sollievo io non trovassi in lei,
 Di cui, già ben due lustri, or vivo amante?
 Donna mia, per te sola il lauro intero
 Cerco acquistar con lungo studio e pena,
 Perch'io teco dividerlo poi spero.

(vv. 5-11)

Alfieri's verses communicate the sense of a certain mutual intellectual understanding between poet and lover. Rather than simply serve as artistic inspiration or an emotional crutch for the poet, Louise is portrayed as someone capable of fully appreciating the contents of his printed works.⁵⁵ However, Louise's rare capacity to provide "solievo" for Alfieri is highlighted in a notable passage in the *Vita*, when after receiving news of the death of his cherished friend Francesco Gori Gandellini, he writes that only her presence was able to stem the tide of his grief: "Se io non mi fossi trovato con la mia donna al ricevere questo colpo sì rapido ed inaspettato, gli effetti del mio giusto dolore sarebbero stati assai più fieri e terribili. Ma l'aver con chi piangere menoma il pianto d'assai."⁵⁶ From this extract alone, it becomes clear that Alfieri, who frequently depicts himself in his writings as reclusive, singular, and at odds with much of contemporary society, views in the countess an emotional as well as intellectual analogue. This fact speaks to Louise's exceptional role in his life and renders her unique among the women portrayed in the *Vita*.

In his depiction of Louise Stolberg-Gedern, both in the *Vita* and *Rime*, Alfieri models a new type of femininity that anticipates his incongruous treatment of Alceste in his reworking of Euripides' tragedy, where the young woman will be defined by her quiet sacrifice made in preservation of Admèto, her husband, and in honor of their once shared domestic bliss. Although

⁵⁵ Luisa Ricaldone argues that the "legame profondo e autentico" between Alfieri and the countess, strongly intimated by the aforementioned sonnets, can also be seen in the tragedian's intention to dedicate to her his translation of Cicero's *De Senectute* (Ricaldone, "La donna 'nuova' e il 'genio,'" in *Alfieri e il suo tempo*, 334). Alfieri intended Cicero's essay on old age to be the work of his twilight years and an homage to the countess and their decades spent together: "Il sole trattato aureo *Della Vecchiaja* di Cicerone, tradurrò ancora dopo i sessanta anni; opera addattata all'età, e la dedicherò alla mia indivisibile compagna, con cui tutti i beni o mali di questa vita ho divisi da venticinque e più anni, e sempre più dividerò" (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 348-349). The comic playwright, Carlo Goldoni, writes in his *Mémoires* that in his 70s he attentively read Marin-Jacques-Clair Robert's treatise on old age, *De la vieillesse* (1777), demonstrating the solace that Alfieri hoped to derive from translating Cicero. Alfieri's premature death at the age of 54, however, prevented him from completing the project. For Goldoni's reading of Robert, see *Tutte le opere*, ed. Giuseppe Ortolani, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1954).

⁵⁶ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 259-260.

Alfieri's final tragic heroine is by all appearances an homage to the countess, Louise can be directly associated with questions concerning the author's tragic theater in other ways. The prominent position she occupies in his writings grants her a stature similar to that of his other enduring female protagonists. But although his portrait of her tends toward idealization, even to the point of rendering her blandly inscrutable at times,⁵⁷ a certain tragic substratum occasionally underlies her image. In the *Vita*, her life with Charles Edward takes on tragic dimensions; by adopting language reminiscent of his tragedies in order to describe the couple's unhappy marriage as a tyranny, Alfieri casts his lover as a sort of tragic figure. But she is a tragic figure for whom he plans a happy ending, as his repeated praise of her in both the *Vita* and *Rime* indicates. Ultimately, however, this happy ending remains somewhat elusive, threatened at first by their frequent separations, then by the tragedian's later preoccupation with mortality and his fear of outliving her. Rather than removed from Alfieri's tragic production, Louise Stolberg-Gedern is deeply bound up in it as an explicit source of inspiration as well as, more importantly, an intellectual and emotional companion whom Alfieri portrays as crucial to his ability to write and apply himself in his studies. Yet she remains distinct from the heroines who people his tragic pantheon since she resists becoming fully "tragediabile." Instead, she is a woman who in Alfieri's writings is often positioned deliberately adjacent to tragedy, whose decades-long relationship with Alfieri endured notwithstanding its many tests. She represents, moreover, the domestic stability largely alien to Alfierian tragedy up until its celebration in *Alceste seconda* but to which Alfieri appears to aspire following his account of meeting his lover in the *Vita* and in the various lyrics dedicated to her.

⁵⁷ Vincenza Perdichizzi writes that despite being the protagonist of numerous lyrics, the countess "non ha né identità né nome nelle *Rime*, dove figura come la 'donna' per eccellenza" (Perdichizzi, "Le 'Rime' alfieriane," 41).

Lastly, as Luisa Ricaldone states,⁵⁸ scholars have traditionally viewed the countess as largely incidental to Alfieri's best literary output, oftentimes going so far as to cast doubt on the validity of the famous epithet "degno amore" that the tragedian bestows on her in the *Vita*. This negative perspective is undoubtedly facilitated by the large measure of silence to which history has condemned Louise given the destruction of her and Alfieri's letters,⁵⁹ which has engendered interpretations of their relationship based almost entirely on Alfieri's own writings and the not always flattering opinions of friends and acquaintances after his death.⁶⁰ But in order to understand Alfieri's final tragic efforts in the late 1790s, the Countess of Albany's strategic prominence in his writings along with the related theme of love,⁶¹ to which he continually returns not only in the *Rime* but in the *Vita*, must be appreciated and adequately examined. In addition to calling into question the typical biographical understanding of the tragedian as a solitary and at turns melancholic and tempestuous author, both open up understudied zones of interest where he can be seen to propose and develop themes that serve as important counterpoints to the themes pursued in his tragedies.

⁵⁸ For an overview of criticism on Louise Stolberg-Gedern, see Luisa Ricaldone, "La donna 'nuova' e il 'genio'," in *Alfieri e il suo tempo*, particularly pages 323-332.

⁵⁹ Alfieri and Louise's correspondence, held at the library in Montpellier in France, was destroyed by a conservative librarian.

⁶⁰ Luisa Ricaldone notes that it was Italian critics who traditionally leveled severe criticisms at the Countess of Albany on the basis of her character's perceived vulgarity and crudeness; as such, she was deemed unworthy of the encomium Alfieri lavishly bestows on her. English and French critics were typically more generous in their assessments (Ricaldone, 323-324).

⁶¹ Vittore Branca describes this love as "quell'aristocratico sentimento dell'amore" (Branca, *Alfieri e la ricerca dello stile*, 60).

IV.2. Alceste: A New Model of Female Heroism

Conceived in 1796, *Alceste seconda* was the fruit of Alfieri's mature study of ancient Greek, which he undertook with unflagging zeal, as the *Vita* reveals, following his and the countess's flight from France and their relocation to Florence in 1792. With *Alceste seconda*, Alfieri returned to writing tragedies after a ten-year hiatus, notably jotting in the margins of the prose outline of *Alceste seconda* that the work represented the "ultima scintilla d'un Volcano che presso è a spegnersi."⁶² However, before he completed his own version, Alfieri translated Euripides' *Alcestis* from the ancient Greek, titling it *Alceste prima*,⁶³ before returning to *Alceste seconda* in May 1798 and finishing it in October of that year.

Alfieri understood the unique place that *Alceste seconda* occupied in his tragic career. In writing previous tragedies, he had taken cues from other authors, as he relates in the *Vita*; for example, his reading of Seneca, whom he criticized, inspired *Agamennone*, Scipione Maffei's *Merope* indignantly spurred him to pen his own version, and the genesis of *Mirra* lay in his passionate reading of the related episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. With *Alceste seconda*, however, Alfieri sought to compete with Euripides while still paying conscious homage to the

⁶² Alfieri, *Tragedie postume*, eds. Clara Domenici and Raffaele De Bello, vol. 3 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1985), 457 in footnote.

⁶³ In her introduction to the critical edition of the two *Alceste*, Clara Domenici points out inconsistencies between Alfieri's account of his classical studies in the *Vita* and as related to his friend, the erudite Tommaso Valperga di Caluso, in a lengthy letter dated 25 June 1798. In the letter, Alfieri admits to relying heavily on literal Latin translations in order to help him make sense of the Greek dramatists and philosophers, a fact downplayed in the autobiography. What emerges from a comparison of the letter and the equivalent account in the *Vita*, is Alfieri's sustained difficulty in mastering the ancient Greek grammar, which he attributed to the diminished mental acuity he experienced as a result of declining health and "old" age. This likely resulted in the heavy use of the literal Latin translation of Euripides' *Alcestis* in his first attempt at translation; he would return to the translation in order to refine it as his studies in ancient Greek progressed. For an overview of Alfieri's work on Euripides and on his translation and rewrite of the tragedian, see Domenici's introduction in Alfieri, *Tragedie postume*, vol. 3, 15-40. For his letter to Caluso, see Alfieri, *Epistolario*, ed. Lanfranco Caretti, vol. 2 (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1981), 255-265.

Greek tragedian. To this end, he writes in the autobiography of the intense emotional reaction provoked by reading Euripides' *Alcestis* in 1796: "La lettura di questa *Alceste* di Euripide mi ha talmente toccato e infiammato che così su due piedi mi accingerei caldo caldo a distendere la sceneggiatura d'una nuova *Alceste*."⁶⁴ He then lays out in considerable detail his approach to writing *Alceste seconda*, stating that with this final work he intended to rectify the perceived faults of Euripides' original, namely its overabundance of characters and implausible moments of levity so as to make the tragedy his own⁶⁵: "Sempre di nuovo mi andava accendendo di farla di mio."⁶⁶ However, further evidence of his appreciation for Euripides is his acknowledgement of the debt owed to the Greek tragedian. Admitting that his tragedy derived entirely from the Greek original despite his modifications, Alfieri writes that he gave his work the title *Alceste seconda* so as to avoid being considered a plagiarist or ungrateful:

Ma tuttavia, non volendo io essere né plagiatario né ingrato, e riconoscendo questa tragedia esser pur sempre tutta di Euripide, e non mia, fra le traduzioni l'ho collocata, e là dee starsi, sotto il titolo di *Alceste seconda*, al fianco inseparabile dell'*Alceste prima* sua madre.⁶⁷

Alfieri's simultaneous rivalry with and admiration for the Greek tragedian is also demonstrated by the existence of the "Schiarimento su questa *Alceste seconda*," dated 15 September 1799.⁶⁸ Here he participates in the contemporary fashion for literary forgery by

⁶⁴ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 308.

⁶⁵ Alfieri writes that in his new *Alceste* "mi prevarrei di tutto il buono del greco, accrescendolo se sapessi, e scarterei tutto il risibile che non è poco nel testo. E da prima così creerei i personaggi diminuendoli" (Alfieri, 308).

⁶⁶ Alfieri, 309.

⁶⁷ Alfieri, 309-310.

⁶⁸ See Alfieri, "Schiarimento del traduttore su questa *Alceste seconda*," in *Tragedie postume*, vol. 3, 411-417.

humorously attempting to pass off his own version of Euripides' *Alcestis* as a long-lost second tragedy by the Greek tragedian just newly come to light. Despite his self-deprecatory references to his knowledge of ancient Greek in the *Vita*, his pride in his own abilities as a tragedian and scholar is clear in the "Schiarimento." Furthermore, his lengthy commentary on his approach to composing *Alceste seconda* and his sustained praise of Euripides are in marked contrast to the generally sparse descriptions of his other tragedies included in the *Vita*, and represent the importance the tragedy held in both his professional career and his personal life.

Far from being a mere pedagogical exercise, the fruit of his fervid study of the ancient Greek language and its most important dramatists and thinkers,⁶⁹ the translation and rewriting of Euripides' *Alcestis* was a deeply personal endeavor for Alfieri. The subject matter undoubtedly resonated with him; in the *Vita*, he declares that while reading the tragedy he was "sí colpito, e intenerito, e avvampato dai tanti affetti di quel sublime soggetto."⁷⁰ In the Euripidean heroine's death and return to life clearly played out his own fears regarding his and Louise's mortality, as detailed in several sonnets from this period. Furthermore, acknowledging the novelty of *Alceste seconda* with regard to his previous output, Alfieri separates the work from his other tragedies and declares it a "cosa postuma,"⁷¹ the tragedy of a tragic author who thought he had already closed the book on his tragic career and who was keenly aware of his own worsening health. It is, therefore, an interesting appellation for a tragedy that is ostensibly a tribute to life in the face of death. However, Alfieri's meditation on Euripides' tragedy and the questions it raises about life's

⁶⁹ In the *Vita*, in the months preceding his work on *Alceste seconda*, Alfieri writes that he was also reading Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato, as well as reading and translating Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes, and the Latin dramatists Plautus and Terence (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 306-307).

⁷⁰ Alfieri, 308.

⁷¹ Alfieri, 310.

impermanence, coincided with and was likely fueled by the recent French invasion of Italy and the French army's return in 1799. Indeed, while he completed the bulk of the work on the two *Alceste* in 1798, he recopied and revised them the following year in a villa outside Florence to which he had retreated with the Countess of Albany just hours before the arrival of French troops in the city.⁷² Amid his political pessimism, even despair, and in a state of increasing physical decline, his withdrawal into his classical studies served as a refuge and brought with it a newfound appreciation for a sort of intellectual domesticity shared with Louise. In the *Vita*, he clearly evokes the emotional and intellectual reciprocity existing between him and the countess, which he also describes earlier in the autobiography as well as in the *Rime*, writing: “Di tutto dunque potendo io favellare con essa, soddisfatto egualmente il core che la mente, non mi credeva piú felice, che quando mi toccava di vivere solo a solo con essa, disgiunti da tutti i tanti umani malanni.”⁷³

On a thematic level, *Alceste seconda* is a peculiar work. In keeping with the Euripidean original, it recounts the story of the young wife and queen Alceste, who took it upon herself to accept the death foreordained for her husband, Adméto. Her sacrifice, however, is well rewarded: taking a break from his Twelve Labors, Ercole descends into the Underworld and mysteriously wins her back, much to Adméto's relief. However, as an Alfierian tragedy, and the author's final work, *Alceste seconda* is perhaps even more peculiar given its non-fatal ending, which stands in stark contrast to the rest of Alfieri's tragic production characterized by violent passions and defiant gestures of resistance in the face of unrelenting and ultimately inexorable tyranny. *Alceste seconda*'s lack of bloodshed, overall languorous tone, and ultimately blissful conclusion mark it

⁷² “Subito arrivato in villa, mi posi a lavorare di fronte la ricopiatura e limatura delle due *Alceste*, non toccando però le ore dello studio mattutino, onde poco tempo mi avanzava da pensare a nostri guai e pericoli, essendo sì caldamente occupato” (Alfieri, 326).

⁷³ Alfieri, 326.

as an incongruous work within Alfierian tragic theater. Moreover, if the typical Alfierian hero obtains sweet release from the bonds of tyranny only in death (usually through suicide), the heroine Alceste with her resurrection proposes a celebration of life. With its ending in which characters return to life and death is, at least temporarily, averted, *Alceste seconda* represents a triumph over the tragedy's invisible tyrant, Fate, which is no longer personified by inscrutably malevolent rulers such as Filippo or enacted through the complex contrasts of character exhibited by such figures as Saul or Mirra. While fate is generally resisted by Alfierian heroes, Alceste through her sacrifice willingly accedes to it. Admèto, by contrast, rebels against fate in his conjugal grief, establishing within the tragedy a marked degree of ambivalence in its oscillation between neoclassical and proto-Romantic impulses.⁷⁴

Because of its atypical qualities with regard to the rest of Alfieri's tragic oeuvre, *Alceste seconda* has experienced some critical neglect, with scholars passing cursory and largely unfavorable judgment on the work when acknowledging it at all.⁷⁵ One such example is Mario Fubini, who concludes his brief analysis of the tragedy by declaring it an "opera scialba nel

⁷⁴ Bartolo Anglani writes that in tragedies "senza fato," the characters are modern because they are left "soli di fronte alle loro pulsioni, privi di un retroterra mitico che li renda davvero 'necessari,'" in *La tragedia impossibile: Alfieri e la profanazione del tragico* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2018), 406. See also Franco Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato: Un dilemma settecentesco dagli aristotelici al Foscolo," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate. Il divenire dei generi fra Sette e Ottocento* (Florence: Vallecchi, Editore, 1989), 32-35. Fido argues that Alfieri does away with the freedom that Euripides' tragedy grants to its characters by allowing them to choose whom to sacrifice in order to satisfy the oracle. By having his reworked characters acquiesce to Alceste's decision to sacrifice herself before they can decide for themselves what to do, Alfieri enforces the "proibizione di non scegliere" (Fido, 34), leaving his characters propelled, instead, by the impulses of their subconscious.

⁷⁵ Arnaldo Di Benedetto and Vincenza Perdichizzi devote a mere page and a half to the tragedy, describing it somewhat dismissively as "non più che un geniale svago" (Di Benedetto and Perdichizzi, *Alfieri*, 163). One of the more sustained analyses of *Alceste seconda* is undertaken by Paola Trivero, who inserts Alfieri's version into an eighteenth-century Italian tradition of rewriting Euripides. See Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 115-135.

complesso e incolore.”⁷⁶ And yet, as previously seen, Alfieri gives a certain pride of place to *Alceste seconda* in the *Vita*, since it was the tragedy with which he resumed his tragic career after a decade spent pursuing other literary endeavors. In the autobiography, he states with unmistakable satisfaction: “Ed ecco in qual modo io mi spergiurai dopo dieci anni di silenzio.”⁷⁷ Additionally, as the dedicatory sonnet appended both to this work and the translation of Euripides’ *Alcestis* makes clear, Alfieri intended for the tragedy to contain both his self-portrait and a portrait of his companion, Louise Stolberg-Gedern. Given the position the work occupies within his tragic output, the attention he pays to it in the *Vita* and other writings, and the deliberate intimacy employed in the rendering of its two protagonists, Alceste and Admêto, *Alceste seconda* therefore merits careful consideration. As Alfieri’s last heroine, Alceste diverges from and yet exhibits affinities with the tragic women who precede her. Through an analysis of these differences and similarities, it becomes possible to situate *Alceste seconda* more precisely within Alfieri’s tragic production as a whole and in relation to other works, such as the *Rime*, which offer similar themes.

If Alfieri revised *Alceste seconda* while retreating into the domestic confines of his villa along with the countess during the French occupation of Florence, in *Alceste seconda* he creates a similarly intimate and restricted atmosphere; he reduces the number of figures appearing in Euripides’ original, eliminating, principally, Apollo and the personification of Death, both of whom open the classical tragedy by arguing over the latter’s right to take the dying Alcestis with him to the underworld. In accordance with the precepts put forth by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing,⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Mario Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1953), 371.

⁷⁷ Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 309.

⁷⁸ In *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing argues that the aim of the dramatic poet was not to reproduce the supernatural figures of the classical past on the contemporary stage if modern belief rejected their presence: “If it be true therefore that we no longer believe in ghosts; and if this unbelief must of necessity prevent this delusion, if without this delusion we cannot possibly sympathise, then our modern dramatist injures

Alfieri, instead, concentrates his attention on the heroine herself. Therefore, following Feréo's brief soliloquy in the opening scene, Alceste announces to her grieving father-in-law, who awaits the death of his son as a result of the Delphic oracle, that she has agreed to serve as a substitute for Adméto in order to placate the gods.⁷⁹ Her reveal and explanation of this choice constitute the bulk of the first act. Alfieri increases the dramatic tension by having the heroine tell the initially incredulous Feréo that his son has been spared without immediately disclosing the means by which the young man's life has been secured. "Donna, or più che i tuoi detti, il guardo e gli atti / Raccapricciar mi fanno" (I, 2, vv. 64-65), Feréo says, correctly deducing that behind Adméto's recovery lies a more sinister remedy. After holding him in suspense, Alceste then declares to her father-in-law: "Ai Numi inferni / La ormai giurata irremissibil preda / Spontanea, son io" (I, 2, vv. 122-124). She is unwavering in her decision to accept the death intended for her husband and by all appearances sacrifices herself in preservation of the family unit.⁸⁰ As she insists to Feréo, her acceptance of this death, agreed upon in secret, was also meant to forestall her father-in-law's attempt to take that death upon himself. This is a notable departure from the Euripidean source material in which Pheres is determined to cling to the little life left to him in his old age and declines to predecease his son.⁸¹ In focusing on Alceste's fatal choice, Alfieri transforms her into

himself when he nevertheless dresses up such incredible fables, and all the art he has lavished upon them is vain." See Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 32.

⁷⁹ L. P. E. Parker writes that Alfieri's decision to have Alceste intercept the oracle and offer her life in exchange for Adméto's before anyone else can make a similar sacrifice, redeems both the original Pheres and Admetus, since the former refuses to die in his son's stead and the latter already knows of his wife's sacrifice. See Parker, "Alcestis: Euripides to Ted Hughes," *Greece & Rome* 50, no. 1 (April 2003): 16.

⁸⁰ Mario Fubini insists that Alceste is modeled on Antigone in her willingness for self-sacrifice (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 370).

⁸¹ See Fido, "Tragedie 'antiche' senza fato: un dilemma settecentesco," in *Le muse perdute e ritrovate*, 33-35.

a virile heroine by evoking the often gendered dichotomy between reason and sensibility that features in several tragedies. Antigone, for example, displays cool reason in her demand for death, but this is contrasted with her secret love for Emone, which she seeks to repress throughout the tragedy. By comparison, Merope is associated entirely with feminine sensibility as an emotionally reactive mother; the foster-father Polidoro, on the other hand, adopts a logic-based approach in his efforts to have Egisto recognized as Merope's long-lost son. In *Alceste seconda*, when Alceste lays out the thought process behind her sacrifice, she specifies that she acts based on rational thought, encoded as masculine, rather than from feminine recklessness:

Non leggerezza femminile, o vano
 Di gloria amore, a ciò mi han tratto: il vuole
 Invincibil ragione. Odimi. Il sangue
 Tutto di Adméto, a me non men che caro,
 Sacro è pur anco: il genitor, la madre,
 E i figli suoi, questo è d'Adméto il sangue:
 Or, qual di questi in vece sua disfatto
 Esser potea da Morte? il figlio forse?
 Ei, due lustri non compie; ancor che in esso
 L'ardir non manchi, l'età sua capace
 Non è per anco di spontaneo vero
 Voler di morte: e se il pur fosse, io madre,
 D'unico figlio il soffrirei?

(I, 2, vv. 174-186)

With her level-headed attitude toward sacrifice, Alceste is the opposite of the emotionally volatile Merope. She freely assumes the death intended for her husband out of necessity, since she alone within the family does not share Adméto's blood and is therefore the most reasonable victim.

Having pared back the mythic overlay Euripides imparts to the tragedy by getting rid of the figures of Apollo and Death, Alfieri has Alceste make reference to a far less anthropomorphic destiny when she states:

Al Destino
 Cedere, è forza: ma il piegarsi ad esso

Senza infringer pur l'animo, discerne
 Dal volgar uom l'alteramente nato.
 Nel mio coraggio addoppierassi il suo:
 Salvo io l'avrò coi genitori e i figli;
 Viva, egli amommi: onorerammi estinta.

(I, 2, vv. 217-223)

Although Paola Trivero argues that *Alceste seconda* is one of the few Alfierian tragedies marked by a certain languor that manifests itself in the tendency of its characters to sit and lie down throughout the tragic action, as opposed to resist tyranny passionately upright,⁸² Alceste's heroism, of which she is fully cognizant, is nevertheless couched in the strength that paradoxically emerges from an acquiescence to the forces of fate without any sense of timor or reluctance. She thus differentiates herself from Antigone, who, despite her *amor mortis*, experiences moments of anguish and uncertainty as a result of her conflicting passion for the tyrant's son, Emone. Additionally, Alceste's reference to her courage, which she hopes will double Admèto's own by way of example, appears to be a perhaps unconscious recall to sonnet CXXVIII⁸³ in which Alfieri cites Louise Stolberg-Gedern's courage in the face of their numerous trials and separations. However, in the tragedy, this courage is a clear marker of Alceste's virility and a sign that any unfavorable feminine attributes have been expurgated from her character.

⁸² Trivero, *Tragiche donne*, 131. Trivero writes: "Così l'*Alceste seconda* è una della poche tragedie alfieriane dove i personaggi si siedono, si alzano e si sdraiano. Sono diacronicamente lontani i tempi del torbido spiare di Filippo e di Egisto, del perpetuo tormento di Clitennestra, dell'ineluttabile incedere di Antigone, dell'angosciosa attesa di Giocasta, dell'irrompere di Merope, dell'irroso turbinio di Rosmunda; il furore, il dolore, e il ribollire di tante passioni, che agitavano quei personaggi non dava loro tregua: quelli erano personaggi, materialmente e scenicamente parlando, sempre in movimento (Trivero, 131).

⁸³ "Deh! perdona: ben sento; era a noi forza / Restar, per altri quattro mesi o sei, / Divisi; e un po' dar tregua ai denti rei / D'invidia, che del pianto altrui si ammorza. / Ben sento; anco tu stessa a viva forza / Dal tuo fido amator, donna, ti sei / Strappata; e i tuoi sospiri erano i miei; / Che de' duo nostri cori una è la scorza. / Del rio destino, e non di te, mi doglio: / Poichè in tutto mi avanzi, anco in coraggio / Per mia norma pigliarti unica voglio. / Forte sarò; non quanto il fòra un saggio: / Quanto il poss'io, ch'or voglio, ora disvoglio; / Or m'alzo, e spero; ed or temo, e ricaggio" (vv. 1-14).

By the end of the first act, Alceste is thus characterized by a virile heroism that distinguishes her from previous Alfierian heroines such as Isabella or Merope, who likewise operate within the domestic sphere but whose reason is often obfuscated by moments of intense passion, maternal or amorous. This is made clear when Alceste insists to Feréo:

io fatta
 Son più che Donna. Ogni timor sia muto:
 Di Adméto io son la salvatrice: or tutti
 Obbediscan me qui.

(I, 3, vv. 248-251)

A heroine who overcomes the limitations of her sex, Alceste both demonstrates Alfieri's gendered conception of heroism, which filters throughout his depictions of tragic heroines, and prepares for his subversion of this conception in his subsequent portrayal of Adméto, beginning in Act II.

In comparison to the composed and rational Alceste, Adméto is rash, passionate, and even self-destructive. While the complexity of the Euripidean Admetus lies in the guilt the character feels, since he knows of Alcestis's sacrifice even before the events of the tragedy begin and yet does nothing to prevent her from sparing his life through the renunciation of hers, Alfieri's Adméto is, instead, portrayed as made to confront the sudden, unexpected, and devastating loss of his better half. The tragedian saves the reveal of Alceste's sacrifice until late in the second act and increases the act's tension by having Adméto desperately search for Alceste throughout the rooms of the palace upon miraculously recovering from his mortal illness. As Adméto looks for his wife, he speaks in tones evocative of Alfieri's own sonnets to Louise which convey the couple's emotional and intellectual bond:

Quante mai cose, Alceste mia narrarti
 Deggio, tremando! entro il tuo cor celeste
 D'ogni mio affetto sfogo almen ritrovo:
 In calma alquanto ritornar miei spirti,
 (Se v'ha chi il possa) il puoi tu sola.

(II, 3, vv. 76-80)

Interestingly for an Alfierian tragedy, *Alceste seconda* is characterized by a general lack of soliloquies. Rather than give vent to their innermost anguish through the use of soliloquies, the characters speak openly to each other. As such, even while Adméto speaks to an invisible Alceste, he is physically accompanied by Feréo, who struggles to keep concealed his knowledge of the heroine's sacrifice. Because the tragedy is constructed around the emotional reciprocity of its two protagonists, their mutual love, there is no secret inner turmoil which demands expression through a soliloquy, as in the case of Clitennestra, for example. Instead, Alfieri's typical alternation of silence and soliloquies to communicate his characters' internal struggles is abandoned early on in the tragedy. Once reunited with Alceste, Adméto intuitively recognizes that something is amiss: "Saper dai labri io voglio, / Ciò che cogli atti e col tacer funesto / Mi si va rivelando" (II, 5, vv. 225-227). When his wife reveals to him what she has done, he reacts in indignant disbelief, an Alfierian reinvention of the Euripidean source material:

Ahi dispietata, insana donna! e a morte
 Sottratto hai me, col dar te stessa a morte?
 Due n'uccidesti a un colpo: ai figli nostri
 Tolto hai tu, cruda, i genitori entrambi,
 E madre sei?

(II, 5, vv. 267-271)

Alceste's response demonstrates again the level-headedness which defines her character in opposition to the more hot-blooded Adméto: "Fui moglie anzi che madre: / E ai figli nostri anco minor fia danno, / L'esser di me pria che del padre orbatì" (III, 5, vv. 271-273). While he accuses her of cruelty and unintentional homicide, since her death will surely lead to his own, the heroine coolly relinquishes her right as mother given its inferior value where the right of a father is concerned. Tellingly, through her rationalization of her sacrifice, she also subordinates her role as

mother to her role as wife, as Alfieri reduces the maternal component of Alceste's character and ignores the civic implications raised by Euripides in the heroine's decision to sacrifice herself and thus maintain political continuity by sparing both her husband, the king, and his heir, their son. Instead, Alfieri centers his focus on Alceste and Adm to's love to the effect of rendering the heroine's maternal role almost incidental and the scope of the tragedy nearly entirely domestic. While in the Euripidean tragedy, Alcestis, on her deathbed, beseeches Admetus not to marry again and therefore bring into the family fold a stepmother who might hate their children and ruin their daughter's marriage prospects out of jealousy, thus evincing a concern for the political as well as familial fallout of such a remarriage, Alfieri's Alceste, secure in Adm to's love, believes that "un tal sospetto   indegno" (III, 1, v. 119).⁸⁴ She fears, rather, that her husband's grief will make him reckless at the expense of his offspring, his kingdom, and his own life, in this order, as Alfieri subtly, and not so subtly, increases the tragedy's emphasis on Alceste and Adm to's union and dresses his heroine almost exclusively in the garb of wife and lover rather than mother and queen.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ For an analysis of this line, see Trivero, 128.

⁸⁵ Alceste explains to her husband:

Ah, non   questo il mio timor, te in vita
Or dopo me lasciando. Altro non temo,
Se non che tu, troppo ostinato e immerso
Nel rio dolore, a danno de' tuoi figli,
E del tuo Regno e di te stesso a danno,
Di questa impresa mia furar non vogli
A tutti il frutto, o non curando od anco
Abbreviando i giorni tuoi.

(III, 1, vv. 120-127)

However, it is intriguing to note that despite the tragedy's overall diminished emphasis on political concerns, Alceste demonstrates more regard for the kingdom and its political stability than her husband.

Alceste's is, in a certain sense, the longest suicide in Alfierian tragedy, spanning three acts until her presumed death (she does not actually perish as in Euripides' tragedy). As such, her prolonged death gives Alfieri the opportunity to explore the psychology of grief. However, it is not Alceste's sorrow at parting from her husband and family which the tragedian examines; rather, he focuses on Adméto's despair at his wife's passing in a depiction of male grief, an emotion which rarely features in his tragic theater. This despair turns into a furor which Adméto directs at his father whom he blames for Alceste's death. In Alfierian tragedy, the heroine often becomes the destabilizing force which threatens the integrity of the family unit; she is the obstacle who comes between the father and his son.⁸⁶ However, in *Alceste seconda*, the titular heroine assumes the peacekeeping role that some scholars have assigned to most Alfierian heroines in general.⁸⁷ When Adméto asks why Feréo was not swift to give up his life in exchange for that of his son,⁸⁸ Alceste reproaches her husband for his misdirected anger:

Sposo, e tu farti
Minor pur tanto di te stesso or osi
Con cotai sensi? ad empia ira trascorre
Contro al tuo padre tu?

(III, 2, vv. 186-189)

This attempt at familial diplomacy seemingly likens Alceste to heroines such as Isabella and Antigone, who both take it upon themselves to restore the fractured relations between their lovers

⁸⁶ As her parents' only child, Mirra, of course, is an exception to this rule; however, she does engender conflict between Peréo and Ciniro, who treats his daughter's betrothed with paternal kindness. Furthermore, Peréo himself refers to Ciniro as "padre." This illusion of a father-son bond is destroyed when Mirra rejects Peréo during their nuptials and his resulting despair drives him to suicide.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Stephanie Laggini Fiore, *The Heroic Female: Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

⁸⁸ Adméto interrogates his father: "Allor perchè non eri / Presto a redimer con la vita tua / Il mio morire tu?" (III, 2, vv. 184-186). His status as Feréo's only son and the latter's decision to consult the Delphic oracle out of paternal love, should have made this choice obvious.

and their lovers' fathers. However, there is a major difference between Alceste and the cited heroines: while Isabella and Antigone both work, at least initially, to repair the bond between father and son in their respective tragedies, the father (i.e. Filippo and Creonte) functions in the tragic action as the tyrant, thus calling into question the legitimacy of the heroine's actions within the tragedy's domestic setting. In *Alceste seconda*, the heroine's attempt at intervention between father and son is unimpeachable since Alfieri's Feréo differs sharply from the Euripidean Pheres. Where in the ancient Greek tragedy Pheres is portrayed as completely opposed to the idea of self-sacrifice, not believing Admetus entitled to his father's life when he has already been granted his kingdom, Alfieri's Feréo is softened. He becomes a father who, although deeply in love with his wife, would have died in place of his son had not Alceste already decided to sacrifice herself on Adméto's behalf. Indeed, admitting that despite his old age the years shared with his wife are still too sweet to give up without regret, Feréo paints an idealistic portrait of mature domesticity which recalls Alfieri's domestic aspirations expressed in the sonnets he dedicates to the countess:

E qui, non niegherotti,
Nè arrossierò nel diretelo, che dolce
M'era ancora molto il viver, ch'io divido
Or già tanti anni con sì amata donna,
Con la tua egregia venerabile madre:
Specchio è dell'alma mia; per essa io vivo;
E in essa vivo.

(III, 2, vv. 227-233)

Feréo and his wife, who remains unseen, therefore become the mirror image, aged up, of Adméto and Alceste, as Alfieri evokes the praise bestowed upon Louise in the *Rime*⁸⁹ in order to eulogize

⁸⁹ In the already cited sonnet LI, contained in the second part of the *Rime* and composed 1 November 1795, Alfieri anticipates Feréo's inability to live without his wife or predecease her, writing about the Countess of Albany: "Sola un'anima siam, sola una salma" (v. 14). Both the sonnet and Féreo's words share affinities with the chorus's verses at the close of Act I: "Tropp'uopo è a noi la sua terrestre salma; / Che Adméto e Alceste son duo corpi e un'alma" (I, 4, vv. 284-285).

domestic companionship. The loss of a similar bliss for himself causes Adméto to collapse when Alceste's death draws near, making him the only Alfierian hero to faint within the tragic action. The only other notable swoon in Alfierian theater is Merope's at the close of the eponymous tragedy, although traditional criticism has often commented on the physical fragility and emotional delicacy of other Alfierian tragic women.⁹⁰ With Adméto's faint, however, Alfieri has his hero employ a physiological language more consonant with his heroines.⁹¹ Swooning in the name of love, Adméto undermines gendered patterns of behavior distinguishing heroes from heroines in eighteenth-century tragedy.⁹²

In Act IV, Alceste disappears from the tragic action. Suddenly arriving on the scene, Ercole orders her maidservants to carry her, barely breathing, to the temple of Apollo and Mercury where

⁹⁰ A quick survey of some of the most authoritative voices in twentieth-century Alfierian criticism reveals a tendency to refer to Alfierian heroines in unequivocally gendered language. For example, Mario Fubini considers Mirra "la più debole ed infelice" among Alfierian heroines (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 350). Raffaello Ramat criticizes Alfieri's choice to have Antigone distracted by an "amore donnesco" for Emone (Ramat, *Alfieri: Tragico lirico*, 55). Later, Mario Trovato writes that the same heroine possesses an "animo delicatamente femminile," in *Il messaggio poetico dell'Alfieri: La natura del limite tragico* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1978), 59. And Walter Binni refers to Ottavia's "propria fragilità femminile," which impedes her from accepting death without fear (Binni, *Alfieri: Scritti, 1969-1994*, 94).

⁹¹ Alfieri was not disinclined to assign typically feminine behaviors to his heroes. Agamennone's recollection of his weeping in Troy is one such example, even though these tears are not actually depicted on stage. Alfierian women, however, weep openly throughout the tragic action. Notably, Alceste goes to her presumed death dry-eyed, unlike the Euripidean Alcestis who weeps over her marriage bed.

⁹² In *The History of Tears*, Anne Vincent-Buffault writes that while the century's "taste for sensibility" welcomed tears and other typically feminine modes of conduct from men in theater, such behavior was only tolerated in certain instances. Voltaire, for example, believed love in tragedy to be an inferior reason for strong emotional reactions from men. Instead, tears shed in the name of such abstract concepts as political virtue and humanity were more acceptable. See Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears*, trans. Teresa Bridgeman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 76. The writing of *Alceste seconda* itself falls within this pattern of physiological responses traditionally assigned to women. As Alfieri records in the *Vita*, in the margins of the prose version of the tragedy's first act he wrote "Steso con furore maniaco, e lagrime molte" (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 309).

she will wait until he can win back her life from the god of the underworld.⁹³ Alceste's temporary retreat from the tragedy grants Alfieri additional space to explore the effects of grief on Adméto. If in previous tragedies he often sets up a dichotomy between reason and sensibility, which divides his protagonists along gendered lines, most notably in his portrayal of mothers whose reason is overcome by their mourning for their sons, either slain or presumed slain, Alfieri does not necessarily deprive Adméto of his wits; instead, he imposes a sort of logic on the hero's grief. It is a logic founded on an intensely idealized conception of love which only elect lovers are fully able to comprehend, as Adméto reveals to Alceste's maidservants when they prevent him from approaching her body on Ercole's orders:

Altro è, ben altro
 In me il dolor, che non l'inutil gelo
 In voi della fallace ragion vostra.
 Non son d'insano or l'opre mie; ma saldo
 Volere intero, ed invicibil figlia
 Di ragionato senno, la feroce
 Disperazione mia, m'impongon ora
 L'alto proposto irrevocabil, donde
 Nè voi, nè il tempo, nè d'Olimpo i Numi,
 Nè quei d'Abisso, svolgermi mai ponno.
 Donne, a voi lo ridico; il corpo io voglio
 Della consorte mia.

(IV, 4, vv. 171-182)

If Alceste meets her death with composure, insisting that Adméto live on after her passing to raise their children, Adméto's outpouring of grief is only deceptively excessive. In Act III, Feréo admits that should the oracle have demanded two lives in exchange for Adméto's, he would have willingly died, following down into the underworld his wife, whose death by natural causes he

⁹³ Unlike Euripides, Alfieri does not explain how Ercole is able to win back Alceste's life. Instead, the entire episode is veiled in a cloak of mystery, leading Mario Fubini to argue that Alfieri imposes a Christian morality on the tragedy's conclusion (Fubini, *Vittorio Alfieri: Il pensiero, la tragedia*, 371).

first graciously hypothesizes.⁹⁴ According to the tragedy's subtext, Feréo's inability to live without his spouse therefore sanctions Adméto's later decision in Act IV to refuse all food and drink and commit a slow suicide by starvation in the absence of his wife. This is a significant departure from Euripides, whose Admetus remains alive to disguise his grief and offer his famed hospitality to a jovial and quickly soused Heracles, who is kept deliberately unaware of Alcestis's death. Adméto's suicide attempt, which is bloodless and protracted, at least according to the conventions of Alfierian tragedy, clearly represents for Alfieri the more plausible reaction to the death of one's beloved; it also stands as his renegotiation of the source material, which anticipates Alceste's return to life by the tragedy's end and thus demands that he deviate from his traditional and preferred methods of suicide, i.e. by sword or poison. Furthermore, Adméto's determination not to outlive his wife becomes the very means by which Alceste is permitted by the gods to walk once more among the living. Eschewing Euripides' solution of having Heracles tussle with the personification of Death, Alfieri attributes Alceste's resurrection to the powerful and mysterious force of love, which pleased the gods and moved them to action, as Ercole reveals:

Ad essi piacque, o Adméto,
 Che tu infermassi a morte, onde poi campo
 Alla virtù magnanima d'Alceste
 Schiuso venisse; ed agli Iddii pur piacque,
 Che tu estinta credendola l'immenso
 Tuo amor mostrassi col feroce giuro

⁹⁴ Feréo reasons with Adméto:

Per te morir non mi attentava io forse,
 La mia donna lasciando: ma, se due,
 D'una in vece, dovute erano a Pluto
 Le vittime; se in sorte alla cadente
 Moglie mia fida il natural morire
 Toccato fosse; ah, nè un istante allora
 Io stava in dubbio di seguirla, io sciolto
 Allor da tutti i vincoli di vita.

Di non mai sopravvivere.

(V, 1, vv. 164-170)

Alfieri's decision to have Ercole succeed in his quest to win back Alceste on the basis of the gods' approval of Admèto's immense love for his wife, heroizes a figure who in Euripides is more ambivalent and whose motivations for his actions are arguably more complex. It also threatens to cast a shadow over Alceste's own heroic sacrifice on behalf of her husband, which was intended to spare him from the death he now readily seeks. Yet Alfieri makes his heroine a more visible and audible presence with respect to Euripides' at the end of the tragedy. Whereas the Greek tragedian has Heracles present a mute and initially veiled Alcestis to a stunned Admetus, Alfieri keeps the veil but has his Alceste speak to her astonished spouse once unveiled by Ercole. The sound of Alceste's voice becomes the means by which Admèto recognizes his wife; he exclaims: "Ah, l'alma voce, l'adorata voce / Quest'è d'Alceste" (V, 1, vv. 126-127). Euripides' Admetus identifies Alcestis by sight alone, transforming the heroine into an entirely passive figure. Alfieri, on the other hand, utilizes Alceste's voice to have his heroine actively intervene in the remaining tragic action, granting her an agency withheld from her in the Euripidean tragedy. Alceste's speech, too, serves as perhaps yet another recall to Louise Stolberg-Gedern, whose intellectual capacities the tragedian extols in both the *Vita* and *Rime*. For Alfieri, his devotion to the countess derived from much more than the sight of her beauty and was instead fueled by a deep intellectual and emotional correspondence, evidenced by their frequent conversations centered on literature,⁹⁵ by the emphasis in his writings on a shared intellectual discourse that he posits as the

⁹⁵ In a letter to the canon Ausano Luti, written in 1803, the countess comments on the evenings spent with Alfieri discussing the books they had read: "Et je puis vous assurer que les soirées que je passe seule avec le poète me paraissent bien plus courtes. Nous repassons ce que nous avons lu, et le temps s'écoule sans y penser" (quoted in Ricaldone, "La donna 'nuova' e il 'genio': per un ritratto di Luisa Stolberg," in *Alfieri e il suo tempo*, 339).

reason for his deep and lasting attraction to her. In the tragedy which serves as the portrait of Alfieri's relationship with Louise, their intellectual and emotional correspondence is best conveyed through the dialogic exchanges between Admèto and Alceste, which communicate their close intimacy and unbreakable bond. As a result, Euripides' original conclusion in which Alcestis is merely a silent, statuesque, and emotionally distant presence demanded a rewrite.⁹⁶

Restored to life and reunited with her husband, Alceste announces: “Molti e lieti anni infra i parenti e i figli / Trarremo insieme” (V, 1, vv. 132-133). It is a declaration with direct echoes to multiple lyrics found in the *Rime*. In sonnet XC, composed on 2 November 1783, the same year as his separation from Louise in Rome, Alfieri writes: “O insieme in solitudine rimota / Vivremo un giorno in dolci e lieti nodi” (vv. 10-11). This exact sentiment returns in sonnet XXXII, included in the second part of the *Rime* and composed on 17 December 1794. In reference to the Florentine monastery where Louise initially fled with Alfieri's assistance following her separation from Charles Edward Stuart in 1780, the poet writes: “Cangiò il destino: in questo loco istesso, / Lieti e securi e indivisibili ora, / I guai trascorsi esilariam noi spesso” (vv. 12-14). Although in real life Alfieri's final decade was characterized by political and even domestic disillusionment⁹⁷ and

⁹⁶ For Alfieri, Louise's beauty was secondary to her emotional and intellectual qualities, which, unlike the first, only increased with age. Remarking on his companion twelve years after their first meeting, he writes: “E non errai per certo, poichè più di dodici anni dopo, mentr'io sto scrivendo queste chiacchiere, entrato oramai nella sgradita stagione dei disinganni, vieppiù sempre di essa mi accendo quanto più vanno per legge di tempo scemando in lei quei non suoi pregi passeggeri della caduca bellezza. Ma in lei si innalza, addolcisce, e migliorasi di giorno in giorno il mio animo: ed ardirò dire a creder lo stesso di essa, la quale in me forse appoggia e corrobora il suo” (Alfieri, *Vita scritta da esso*, 209).

⁹⁷ In a psychoanalytical reading of the tragedy, Jacques Joly hypothesizes that rather than represent a tribute to the Countess of Albany, *Alceste seconda* was intended to be a subtle expression of Alfieri's anxieties over Louise's future conduct following his death. According to Joly, the tragedy demonstrates how its author feared that the countess would betray him and his memory by bestowing her affections on another man. Rather than serve as a portrait of Louise, Alceste, then, models behaviors that Alfieri hoped his companion, who evidently gave him reason to doubt her, would adopt. See Joly, “Teatro e autobiografia nell'*Alceste* d'Alfieri (1798),” in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi in memoria di Carlo Palmisano. San Salvatore Monferrato, 22-24*

physical decline, somewhat offset by his immersion in his classical studies and experimentation with other genres, including comedy and satire,⁹⁸ all ends happily in *Alceste seconda*. Enrico Mattioda writes that in his adherence to a pessimistic vision of reality, “la tragedia a esito funesto rimane dunque, per Alfieri, l’unica possibilità tragica”⁹⁹ However, with *Alceste seconda*, Alfieri himself suggests otherwise. In his last tragic work, death is overcome, life triumphs, the political implications of the source material are minimized, and domestic harmony is championed. But in this idealized and likely wishful portrait of amorous companionship, Alfieri posits a new vision of female heroism. His Alceste appears to follow in the vein of Antigone through her courage and willingness for sacrifice which both surpass the expectations of her sex, yet she lacks the psychological anguish and complexity which define many of his other tragic women and which are often expressed through his strategic use of soliloquies and his characters’ tense interrelationships. Furthermore, Alceste’s composure is counterbalanced by Admèto’s explosive grief and proclivity for self-destruction, as Alfieri portrays his hero according to some of the same gestural and emotional codes identifiable in his depiction of tragic heroines. Lastly, it is not just through its non-fatal ending that *Alceste seconda* distinguishes itself, at least thematically, from previous Alfierian tragedies. In its heightening of the tragedy’s familial dimensions, the author’s

settembre 1983, ed. Giovanna Ioli (San Salvatore Monferrato-Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria-Regione Piemonte, 1985), 241-255.

⁹⁸ For a brief but recent analysis of Alfieri’s engagement with the satiric genre during this period, see Francesca Tomassini’s contribution “‘La ignominosa satira del sacrosanto nome di libertà.’ Tragico e comico nel *Misogallo* alfieriano,” in *La satira in prosa: Tradizioni, forme e temi dal Trecento all’Ottocento*, eds. Carlotta Mazzoncini and Paolo Rigo (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2019), 113-122.

⁹⁹ Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1994), 210. Mattioda writes that Alfieri’s preferred method of ending his tragedies with the death of the hero ran contrary to Enlightenment preferences for a restoration of order and the just punishment of the wicked, both of which sanctioned happy endings in tragedy. Mattioda, however, seems to overlook the presence of *Alceste seconda*, which, despite being thematically distinct from typical Alfierian tragedies, merits consideration for the ways in which it contradicts typical Alfierian tragic formulas.

rewriting of Euripides approaches the bourgeois dramas that will proliferate in the following century¹⁰⁰; but in its composed characterization of Alceste, in its disinterest in a penetrating exploration of the psychology behind her sacrifice, in stark contrast to its multifaceted portrayal of Adméto, *Alceste seconda* conforms to the neoclassical conventions of tragedy that call for a return to order and for the resolution of morally unjustifiable tragic conflict.¹⁰¹ In his psychologically rich portrayals of tragic heroines, Alfieri generally shows a disinterest in the predilection of eighteenth-century tragedy for happy endings and poetic justice. Unlike the tragic women who precede her, Alceste is, instead, represented as Adméto's impeccable other half, in the singular instance within Alfierian tragic theater in which the typical vision of intense psychological solitude amid unrelenting tyranny is replaced by another vision, this time of blissful companionship, conjugal fidelity, and emotional and intellectual complementarity. Rather than contend for space with the hero within the tragic action, the heroine shares it with him without any hint of psychological struggle on her part. Unlike in other Alfierian tragedies marked by the intense and oftentimes violent conflicts between characters, Alceste's disappearance in Act IV sets off the tragedy's attempt to vindicate her presence within the tragic action through Adméto's desperate attempt to reunite with her in death, while her resurrection in the final act confirms the necessity of her presence both to the tragic action and to the hero himself.¹⁰² Additionally, Alceste's

¹⁰⁰ On Alfieri's relation to bourgeois drama, see Bartolo Anglani, *La tragedia impossibile*. Anglani writes that "Alfieri è dunque 'borghese' non perché aderisca ai valori della borghesia ma perché è moderno: e le sue tragedie per questa ragione non possono riprodurre magicamente un mondo che non esiste più, e devono anzi—a modo loro, e con esiti paradossali—esplorare l'inferno terreno degli uomini, non più quello tremendo e oscuro in cui gli esseri umani convivevano con gli Dei" (Anglani, 83).

¹⁰¹ Mattioda, *Teorie della tragedia nel Settecento*, 200.

¹⁰² Nicole Loraux argues that Alcestis's death represents an exception in classical Greek theater, in which women died silently and unseen and without hope of return. See Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 22-23.

disappearance and return act as a celebration of the role of love in tragedy, since it is through love that the heroine defies death. Conversely, in previous tragedies such as *Ottavia*, *Agamennone*, and *Rosmunda*, love is a fraught thematic and depicted as an uncontrollable, irrational, and even lethal passion.

At the conclusion of the tragedy, Ercole declares: “Un vivo specchio in terra. Era sol degno / Di Alceste Adméto; e sol di Adméto, Alceste” (V, 1, vv. 195-196). The god’s words evoke the feelings that Alfieri expresses for Louise in the *Rime*. However, despite this happy ending, the tragedy ultimately offers an ambivalent portrayal of its heroine. A highly idealized and self-sacrificing lover who lacks the psychological depth of many of the tragic women who precede her, Alceste becomes in many ways just a model, albeit sincere, of female heroism. She is a personification of heroic prescriptions from which are excluded, however, the psychic nuances and imperfections of character that humanize and complicate the heroines who come before her.

Alceste seconda, along with *Alceste prima* without which the former tragedy could not exist, are two of Alfieri’s most intimate tragic works. They reflect his close relationship with the countess as well as his unwavering zeal for classical studies, yet both propose through their heroine a gentler vision of tragedy that marks them as distinct from the tragedies written prior to his ten-year hiatus and suggests his awareness of a change in sensibility amid the transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. Because of their thematic links to the *Vita* and the *Rime*, on which Alfieri worked long before embarking on a rewrite of Euripides, the two *Alceste* should not be seen as lesser works existing at the periphery of Alfieri’s output as author. Instead, both works deepen themes central to his written production and represent his evolving approach to tragedy through his integration of thematics associated with other genres. As for Alceste, despite the idealization which seemingly distances her character from that of previous Alfierian heroines,

she offers herself up as additional proof of Alfieri's enduring interest in and constant return to depictions of tragic heroines. While the last tragedies written just prior to his hiatus in 1787 were *Bruto primo* and *Bruto secondo*, two politically-themed tragedies from which women are entirely absent, Alfieri dedicated his final tragedy to the central female figure in his life, the Countess of Albany, and transformed it into a celebration of womanhood, albeit an idealized version of it. In rewriting Euripides, Alfieri insists on the necessity of women not only within the economy of *Alceste seconda*, since Adméto's life hinges entirely on the presence of his beloved wife but, so too, inadvertently perhaps, within the economy of his general tragic theater.

Conclusion

With this study I have sought to give Alfierian heroines their due by calling attention to their complexities and contradictions, to their dynamic representation within Italy's most important tragic theater. Although Alfieri has been the subject of numerous works of eighteenth-century scholarship, the few extant studies devoted to his female tragic figures demonstrate that there are still many aspects of his tragic theater that remain to be fully appreciated and explored. In order to analyze female heroism in Alfierian tragedy, I have tried to link Alfieri's portrayal of his heroines to the historical and literary milieu in which he wrote, and I have endeavored to show that the changing nature of tragedy in the Italy of the late eighteenth century is reflected in and challenged by his often ambivalent but always multilayered depictions of tragic heroines. This study of female heroism in Alfierian tragedy reveals that in addition to being Italy's greatest tragedian, Alfieri also created one of the most significant arenas of female dramatic representation within eighteenth-century Italian theater. Only the comedies of Carlo Goldoni offer up female protagonists of a similar psychological depth.

The origins of this project lie in an early reading of Alfieri's *Agamennone*. I was struck by the multidimensionality of Clitennestra's character, her paranoia and desperation, her oscillation between moments of striking lucidity and episodes that demonstrated a mind in disarray. It was this portrayal of the mythic queen that led me to consider just how and why Alfierian heroines as a group were so compelling and just what an analysis of Alfieri's female heroism might reveal about his tragedy, which takes cues both from Neoclassicism and from emerging Romantic trends. With their psychological richness and subtlety of character that often distinguishes them from the male heroes to whom they are juxtaposed, Alfierian heroines manifest Alfieri's interest in

depicting the deeply interiorized psychic conflicts that will find wider expression in the literary production of the nineteenth century.

While Alfieri's tragic corpus is replete with heroines, these women have rarely been studied organically as an entire group. Due in large part to Alfieri's own penchant for severe self-critique, the tragedies which have received less critical attention tend also to be those with which Alfieri himself expressed dissatisfaction. This means that heroines such as Mirra and Clitennestra have been amply studied, while other heroines such as Ottavia or Rosmunda have traditionally received far less scholarly notice or have even been dismissed as inferior creations. This study has aimed to correct this imbalance by demonstrating the analytical potential in studying Alfierian heroines thematically, in uncovering the ways in which they dialogue with one another and communicate common themes and anxieties that span the entirety of Alfieri's career as a tragedian. But further work needs to be done; there are still more aspects that need to be examined in order for Alfieri's multifaceted depiction of female heroism to come more clearly into focus. While I have sought to show how an understanding of this depiction can illuminate Alfieri's approach to tragedy, there are some heroines whom this study does not address. However, these other heroines offer an opportunity to investigate additional critical questions raised by the author's tragic theater. Virginia, Bianca, Maria Stuarda, and Aegistrata, for example, invite an investigation into the convergence of political discourse and Alfieri's portrayal of tragic womanhood. In this investigation would have to be included, for that matter, Antigone and Sofonisba, whom I have already studied in relation to the nexus of silence and fate. Other heroines, such as Romilda and Micol, suggest Alfieri's interest in exploring an unmaternal category of feminine grief. Further studies will add nuance to the portrait of Alfierian tragic womanhood that I have created here and

propose new thematic linkages between Alfierian heroines—even between those whom I have already examined.

Due to their number and complexities, Alfierian heroines constitute one of the greatest bodies of female dramatic representation in all of Italian theater. Furthermore, they came into being during crucial shifts within Italian and European literature. At the time of their creation, the transition to Romanticism was underway, and the bourgeois drama was growing in popularity. Because they have rarely been the subject of exclusive studies, Alfierian heroines offer the possibility for fruitful analyses that position them in relation to the other heroines of contemporary dramatic production, both within Italy and beyond. Alfieri's tragic women, along with the female protagonists of Ugo Foscolo's tragedies, of Friedrich Schiller's dramas, of Percy Bysshe Shelley's tragic works, form a pantheon of European dramatic heroines with the potential for enlightening comparative studies. With my study, which makes strategic use of tragic and feminist theories, I have sought to relate Alfierian tragedy to the evolution of the tragic genre as a whole, since outside of Italy, Alfierian tragic theater has frequently escaped the notice of scholars of European drama. Additionally, the traditional understanding of Alfieri as an isolated and individualistic author, existing at odds with the rest of society, has likely contributed to a relative lack of studies even within Italian-language scholarship that address Alfieri's relationship to contemporary European dramatic production. By demonstrating how Alfierian heroines exist in dialogue with one another, I hope to have also shown how they might be seen to dialogue with the heroines of other playwrights from the same period.

Lastly, with this project I have endeavored to interrogate the relationship between women and the tragic genre, between tragic heroines and the gender constructs unique to tragedy that inform the representation of female heroism. While this relationship has been examined in studies

on classical drama and by French and British scholars of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theater,¹ far less has been said with regard to eighteenth-century Italian dramatic production, which, as I have tried to demonstrate, offers an intriguing window into the challenges posed by female representation within a genre that often contests the presence of women. I have sought to recognize Alfierian heroines for their psychological depth and multidimensionality as well as for their ambivalences. In so doing, I have also desired to expand the discursive space permitted to women within studies on tragedy by showing how eighteenth-century Italian drama offers itself as fertile ground for investigations into female representation and into the discourses, institutions, and societies that shaped it. With its complex portrayal of female heroism, Alfierian tragedy often challenges the contemporary norms that governed the representative capacity of women. In its heroines' struggles for agency and expression within the tragic action, it becomes a reflection on the difficulties inherent in the realization of female subjectivity in a dramatic form that has typically excluded women to at least some degree. The relatively few studies dedicated to Alfierian heroines perhaps speak to this traditional exclusion.

Although Francesco de Sanctis opined that no Alfierian hero or heroine was particularly memorable,² it has been my objective to show precisely the opposite. Alfierian tragic theater abounds in diverse representations of psychologically complex women, who often participate in the tragic action in subversive ways. One person who recognized the remarkable qualities of at

¹ See, for example, Katherine M. Quinsey, ed., *Broken Boundaries: Women & Feminism in Restoration Drama* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999); Lisa Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Vincent Dupuis, *Le Tragique et le Féminin: Essai sur la poétique française de la tragédie (1553-1663)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

² Francesco de Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 2 (Naples: Morano, 1870), 442-443.

least one Alfierian heroine early on was Lord Byron. In 1819, while attending a performance of *Mirra* during his sojourn in Italy, the English poet fell into a fit at the sight of Mirra's suffering.

In his journal, he recounts the incident:

Last night I went to the representation of Alfieri's *Mirra*—the two last acts of which threw me into convulsions—I do not mean by that word—a lady's hysterics—but the agony of reluctant tears—and the choking shudders which I do not often undergo for fiction.³

Byron's convulsions were a sympathetic response to the heroine's anguish as she struggles to suppress her illicit passion. More importantly, the poet's fit is also an acknowledgment of the vitality and dynamism of *Mirra*, her efficacy as a tragic subject, and her ability to move readers and spectators of Alfierian tragedy alike. However, Byron's differentiation between the "agony of reluctant tears" and a "lady's hysterics," between his virile and justifiable emotional display and the exaggerated and affected tears of a woman, is a reminder of tragedy's often ambivalent relationship to women and the gendered distinctions on which it operates. This study has sought to go beyond Byron's impression by demonstrating how Alfierian heroines—not just one—are worthy tragic subjects in their own right. Furthermore, they illuminate the sometimes stark differences in the ways in which women and men participate in Alfierian tragedy and in its conception of tragic heroism. Although it was *Mirra* alone who moved Byron to tears, she is not the only woman within Alfieri's pantheon of tragic figures. Instead, she is one of a number of challenging and multidimensional heroines, each deserving of recognition and additional study. If for Byron seeing a performance of *Mirra* gave rise to paroxysms and reluctant weeping, future scholars of Alfierian tragedy, hopefully, will find their encounter with Alfierian heroines a slightly gentler but no less affecting experience.

³ Quoted in Peter Cochran, "Byron and Alfieri," in *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 56.

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Appendix

Included are brief synopses of the tragedies discussed in this dissertation.

Filippo

Alfieri worked on *Filippo* over a number of years (1775, 1780-1781, 1783) and drew inspiration from César Vichard de Saint-Réal's seventeenth-century novel *Dom Carlos* (1672).

Alfieri's first acknowledged tragedy, *Filippo* is set in Madrid. Act I opens with Isabella, consort of the tyrannical Filippo, who expresses her concealed love for Carlo, Filippo's son and her former betrothed until she was forcibly wed to his father. She and Carlo encounter each other, whereupon Carlo admits his hatred for his father and reveals his love for her. In Act II, Filippo, who suspects his consort's feelings for Carlo, attempts to trick Isabella into confessing her love so as to have a reason to punish his son, whose hatred he reciprocates. Filippo has his loyal minister, Gomez, listen in on his meeting with Isabella. Isabella advocates for leniency when Filippo accuses Carlo of conspiring against him. Filippo takes this as an admission of his consort's love for Carlo. In Act III, Filippo calls his ministers to a meeting where he falsely accuses Carlo of attempted parricide. Loyal to the tyrant, with the exception of Perez, Filippo's ministers declare their support for the king and condemn Carlo. In Act IV, Carlo is arrested, while a concerned Isabella attempts to gather information from Filippo. She then seeks assistance from Gomez and asks to be taken to Carlo's prison cell in order to convince him to flee. In Act V, Carlo rebukes Isabella for having trusted Gomez and adamantly refuses to flee, preferring death instead. However, he beseeches Isabella to consider her safety and not to admit her love for him to Filippo. Filippo then arrives, having been apprised of the escape plot by Gomez. He accuses Isabella and Carlo of adultery. Emboldened, Isabella declares her love for Carlo and her hatred for Filippo. After Carlo commits suicide using a dagger handed to him by Filippo, Isabella thwarts the tyrant's plan to keep her alive by killing herself with the same dagger.

Polinice

Alfieri based *Polinice* (1775-1776, 1781) on Statius' *Thebaid*, but other sources of inspiration include Racine's *La Thébaïde* and Pierre Brumoy's *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, an early eighteenth-century collection of select classical tragedies translated into French.

Before the events of the tragedy begin, Polinice arrives with forces from Argo in order to claim his right to the throne of Thebes, which is meant to be shared on a rotating basis with his brother, Eteocle. In Act I, Giocasta, their mother, fears the imminent conflict. Eteocle attempts to convince her of his right to maintain his rule, but Giocasta is an impartial mother, while Elettra, her daughter, sides with Polinice. Creonte, Giocasta's brother-in-law, agrees to assist Eteocle but harbors designs on the throne. In Act II, Polinice and Eteocle argue before Giocasta, who in her guilt over their incestuous birth endeavors to calm their enmity. Creonte attempts to manipulate Polinice in his own quest to obtain the throne but attracts the suspicions of Elettra, who convinces Polinice not to trust their uncle in Act III. In Act IV, Eteocle attempts to have Polinice drink from a poisoned chalice, but Polinice sees through the ruse. To Giocasta's despair, the brothers agree to settle their differences with a duel outside the walls of Thebes. In Act V, Giocasta anxiously waits

for news of the outcome of the duel. She discovers that Eteocle has been mortally wounded and beseeches Polinice to embrace his brother one last time. Eteocle takes this gesture as an opportunity to stab Polinice. With both her sons slain, Giocasta invokes the ghost of her first husband, the murdered Laio, and commits suicide by plunging a dagger into her womb.

Antigone

As with *Polinice*, Alfieri largely drew inspiration for *Antigone* (1776-1777, 1781) from Statius' *Thebaid*, but another likely source of inspiration was the *Antigone* (1638) of seventeenth-century French playwright Jean Rotrou.

The action of *Antigone* immediately follows that of *Polinice*. In Act I, Antigone encounters her sister-in-law Argia, who hopes to return to Argo with the ashes of her husband Polinice, who has been slain by Eteocle, his brother. The two women debate over who should be the one to defy the Theban ruler Creonte's prohibition against performing burial rights for Polinice. Antigone is motivated by a sense of duty to her family and an unflagging *amor mortis*, but she finally relents and allows Argia to participate in her efforts to perform the necessary burial rights for her brother. In Act II, having been captured by Creonte's guards, Antigone and Argia are brought before the tyrant, who condemns them to death. In Act III, Antigone verbally spars with Creonte and admits to Emone, his son, that she is unable to reciprocate his love. However, she keeps her true feelings for her cousin concealed. In Act IV, seeking to punish Antigone, Creonte puts a choice before her: she can either marry Emone or be put to death. Unwilling to bring shame to her father Edipo, who has been exiled by Creonte, Antigone chooses death. In Act V, Argia is permitted by Creonte to return to Argo bearing Polinice's ashes. She and Antigone share a sorrowful farewell during which the latter heroine admits her love for Emone. Antigone is then led away and ultimately slain. At the sight of her corpse, Emone commits suicide in front of his father.

Agamennone

Alfieri was inspired principally by Seneca when writing *Agamennone* (1776-1778), but certain portions of the tragedy demonstrate a familiarity with Aeschylus, whom Alfieri would have encountered in Brumoy's *Le Théâtre des Grecs*.

The tragedy opens with Egisto invoking the ghost of his dead father, Tieste, and swearing to exact vengeance on the house of Agamennone. Years earlier, Atréo, Agamennone's father and Egisto's uncle, had tricked Tieste into eating his slain children as punishment for having seduced Atréo's wife. Unaware of Egisto's quest for revenge, Clitennestra anxiously awaits news of her husband Agamennone's return from Troy. During his long absence, she has cultivated an adulterous passion for Egisto, to the dismay of her daughter, Elettra. In Act II, Agamennone arrives in Argo but notes his wife's less than joyful reaction at his return. In Act III, Agamennone questions Elettra regarding Clitennestra's altered behavior. Elettra does not reveal to her father what she knows of her mother's adultery, but Clitennestra fears that her secret passion has been betrayed when Agamennone orders Egisto to quit Argo. Clitennestra's anxiety and paranoia increase in Act IV, as Egisto continues to manipulate her in order to transform her into the instrument of his revenge. He pushes her to extreme action when he tells her that Agamennone has taken the captured Cassandra as his mistress. Although Agamennone tries to dispel her jealousy,

Clitennestra agrees to murder her husband. In Act V, despite some momentary hesitation and regret, she is compelled by Egisto to slay Agamennone while he sleeps. With Agamennone dead, Clitennestra manages to penetrate her fog of confusion. She realizes that she has been duped by Egisto when he calls for the death of Oreste, her son and Agamennone's heir. Having foreseen danger, Elettra, however, has already had Oreste spirited away from Argo.

Oreste

Like *Agamennone*, *Oreste* (1776-1778) was inspired by Seneca's treatment of the myth. Alfieri, however, was familiar with Voltaire's *Oreste* (1750) and sought to compete with his French predecessor.

Ten years have passed since the events of *Agamennone*. In Act I, Clitennestra despairs over the failed state of her marriage to Egisto, who openly treats her with contempt. For his part, Egisto fears the return of Oreste to Argo and makes his suspicion of Clitennestra known. In Act II, Oreste and his friend Pilade arrive in Argo and plan to make their entry into the palace disguised as messengers sent by the king of Phocis. They are met by Elettra on their way to Agamennone's tomb. After Elettra recognizes Oreste, brother and sister embrace. In Act III, a disguised Oreste encounters Clitennestra in the palace and tests her capacity for guilt and maternal affection by recounting to her his fictitious death. In Act IV, the two messengers are brought before Egisto, who eventually understands that one of them is Oreste, although neither Pilade nor Oreste will betray the other. When he has the two men arrested, Elettra inadvertently identifies Oreste to a now gleeful Egisto. In Act V, with the people of Argo in open revolt, Oreste and Pilade are freed, and the former hastens to exact revenge on Egisto. Initially torn between maternal sentiment and her love for Egisto, Clitennestra decides to follow Egisto and protect him from her son. The tragedy concludes with a victorious Oreste being informed by Pilade and Elettra that in his fury he mistakenly slew Clitennestra as well as Egisto. Oreste subsequently goes mad in his grief.

Rosmunda

Alfieri used Machiavelli's *Istorie fiorentine* (1532) as the principal source of inspiration for *Rosmunda* (1779-1780, 1782), although the ending borrows from Antoine-François Prévost-d'Exiles's novel *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité* (1728). Alfieri was likely unfamiliar with the Renaissance dramatic treatments of the story.

Rosmunda is set in Pavia in the Middle Ages. Prior to the events of the tragedy, Rosmunda was forcibly married to the Lombard king Alboino, who slew her father and cruelly forced her to drink from his skull at a banquet. Rosmunda seduced Almachilde, who subsequently killed Alboino and became Rosmunda's consort after she usurped the throne. Act I opens with Rosmunda in the company of her stepdaughter Romilda, whom she despises. Both women await the outcome of a battle against Rosmunda's enemies. Rosmunda declares that she will wed Romilda against her will to her political ally. Almachilde returns victorious but states that the victory was due to the efforts of Ildovaldo, whose love Romilda reciprocates. In Act II, Ildovaldo asks Almachilde to help him to secure Rosmunda's consent to marry Romilda. Almachilde is himself secretly in love with Romilda but agrees to assist Ildovaldo. In Act III, Almachilde admits to Romilda his love for her, but she is repulsed by the perfidy of her father's murderer and stepmother's consort.

Rosmunda happens on the scene, and her suspicions of Almachilde are confirmed. She seeks out Ildovaldo, who agrees to help her to avenge herself on Almachilde. In Act IV, Almachilde thwarts Ildovaldo and Romilda's attempt to flee from the castle and has Ildovaldo imprisoned. Torn between her hatred of Romilda and her desire for revenge on Almachilde, Rosmunda frees Ildovaldo from prison so that he can face Almachilde on the battlefield. In Act V, Almachilde declares victory over Ildovaldo, but both men confront Rosmunda. Holding Romilda at knifepoint, Rosmunda attempts to exert control one last time and slays her stepdaughter. In despair, Ildovaldo commits suicide, and Rosmunda and Almachilde square off in a duel to the death.

Ottavia

Alfieri based *Ottavia* (1780-1782) largely on Tacitus' account of Nerone in the *Annals*.

In Act I, the emperor Nerone declares to Seneca, his advisor, that he has recalled Ottavia to Rome. Ottavia had earlier been repudiated and exiled by Nerone but remains popular with the Roman populace. Poppea, Nerone's mistress, fears the consequences of Ottavia's arrival. In Act II, Nerone reveals to Tigellino, a praetorian prefect, that he intends to have Ottavia killed. To avoid a political backlash and to justify Ottavia's execution, Tigellino concocts the lie that Ottavia has betrayed Nerone with her musician. Still in love with Nerone despite his abuse, Ottavia denies the charge of adultery and insists that she has remained faithful to him. In Act III, the Roman populace protests against the tyranny of Nerone and declares their support for Ottavia. Ottavia is dismayed to see that she has been supplanted in Nerone's affections by Poppea but tells Nerone that she will act to quell the revolt in order to secure his safety. In Act IV, Nerone, having decided that Ottavia must die, works to bring calm to Rome. In support of Ottavia, Seneca warns Nerone of the repercussions of her death. Poppea fears for her position given Nerone's treatment of Ottavia, but the emperor assures her that he will not repudiate her. In Act V, Seneca consoles Ottavia by revealing that her handmaidens have not betrayed her even under torture. However, Tigellino launches a new charge at Ottavia: her seduction of the prefect of Nerone's fleet. Knowing that her death is inevitable, Ottavia appears before Nerone and assures him of her virtue. Her only guilt has been her continued love for him. She then commits suicide by ingesting poison from a ring that she has taken from Seneca. The tragedy concludes with Nerone ordering Seneca's death.

Merope

Alfieri composed *Merope* (1782) in reaction to his dissatisfied reading of Scipione Maffei's celebrated version, first staged in 1713. The influence of Voltaire's *Merope* (1744), which was also conceived as a corrective to Maffei's tragedy, must also be considered.

In Act I, Merope expresses her worry over the fate of her son Egisto, whose existence is her sole reason for living. However, she maintains to Polifonte that he perished. Years earlier, Polifonte had usurped the throne of Messene and put to death Cresfonte, Merope's consort, and two of their children. The infant Egisto was spared when Merope had him secretly taken away from Messene. When Polifonte feigns compassion for Merope and asks him to marry her so that they can share the throne, she refuses. In Act II, a young man is brought to the palace having been accused of murdering another youth. Believing that the young man might have some news of her son, Merope questions him and wonders if he might be her son while also fearing that he might be

her son's murderer. In Act III, Polidoro, Egisto's foster-father, arrives in Messene bearing his foster-son's bloodied girdle. Merope takes it as a sign of her son's death and vows to avenge him. In Act IV, Merope and Polifonte confront the young man, whom Polidoro, also in attendance, recognizes as his foster-son. When Merope moves to slay the young man in her rage-suffused grief, Polidoro reveals that he is none other than Egisto. Polifonte declares that he will have Egisto killed unless Merope agrees to marry him to shore up his rule in Messene. In Act V, on the advice of Polidoro, Merope pretends to acquiesce to Polifonte's threat. At their nuptials, Egisto seizes the opportunity to slay Polifonte with the priest's ceremonial axe and rallies the people to his cause. Overcome by emotion, Merope swoons as Egisto is recognized as his father's heir.

Sofonisba

Alfieri based the tragedy *Sofonisba* (1784, 1787) on Livy's account of the Second Punic War in the *Ab Urbe Condita*.

In Act I, the captured Siface, king of Numidia, has his chains removed by Scipione, the Roman general who has just defeated Siface's Numidian forces in his African campaign during the Second Punic War. It is revealed that both Siface and Massinissa, Scipione's ally who was formerly betrothed to Sofonisba, are in love with the Carthaginian queen. In Act II, Sofonisba, who has long cultivated an antipathy toward Rome, makes her first appearance as Scipione's captive after the Roman capture of Carthage. Both believing Siface slain, she and Massinissa confess their love. Additionally, she asks Massinissa not to let her be taken to Rome in chains as a war trophy. In Act III, Siface reappears before an astonished Sofonisba. Although he knows that she has only married him out of a sense of patriotic duty, Siface hopes to save Sofonisba's life with the assistance of Massinissa. Sofonisba retracts her admission of love to Massinissa and declares that she will remain by Siface's side. In Act IV, although knowing that Sofonisba has decided to return to her husband, Massinissa concocts a plan to have both Siface and Sofonisba escape from Scipione's camp. In Act V, Scipione informs Massinissa that Sofonisba already disclosed to him the plan to free her and Siface. Furthermore, separated from his wife, Siface committed suicide. Desiring to follow Siface's patriotic example, Sofonisba meets one last time with Massinissa and requests a cup of poison. She consumes it without saving any for Massinissa, who also intended to kill himself by this means. Scipione then appears and stops the disconsolate Massinissa from stabbing himself in his grief.

Mirra

Alfieri wrote *Mirra* (1784-1786) after being moved by the episode of Myrrha in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Mirra opens with Euricléa and Cecri, Mirra's mother, who discuss the heroine's mysterious behavior and poor health. Euricléa, Mirra's nurse, suspects that Mirra's strange comportment is due to her reluctance to wed Peréo, to whom she is betrothed. In Act II, Mirra's father, Ciniro, investigates the cause of Mirra's weeping and reticence by speaking with Peréo, who is unwilling to force a reluctant Mirra to marry him but otherwise loves the heroine passionately. Visibly agitated, Mirra, in her first appearance, reaffirms her intention to marry Peréo, although she requests that they leave for his kingdom immediately following their nuptials. In Act III, Ciniro

and Cecri urge their daughter to explain her abnormal behavior, but Mirra remains firm in her decision to wed Peréo. Her tormented state is evident as she requests permission to leave Cyprus after the wedding, but she makes an effort to keep her anguish in check. In private, Cecri reveals to Ciniro her fear that her boast to Venere of her daughter's beauty has angered the goddess and caused her to punish Mirra. In Act IV, during her nuptials, Mirra in her torment is unable to see them through to completion and calls for the marriage ceremony to end. In his despair, Peréo flees and is later found to have committed suicide. Increasingly unable to maintain her silence, Mirra confesses that her mother is the sole cause of her torment. In Act V, a frustrated Ciniro interrogates Mirra and demands to know the identity of the man she loves, since it is presumed that her reluctance to wed Peréo is the result of her feelings for another. In her misery, and no longer able to stay silent, Mirra utters Ciniro's name before killing herself with her father's dagger. Ciniro and Cecri, who has appeared on the grisly scene, retreat in horror from their dying daughter.

Alceste seconda

Alfieri composed *Alceste seconda* (1796, 1798) after a ten-year hiatus from writing tragedies. He was persuaded to write the tragedy after a passionate reading of Euripides' *Alcestis*, which he translated from the original Greek. This translation was entitled *Alceste prima*.

Prior to the events of the tragedy, Feréo sought information from the oracle of Delphi regarding the health of his son, Adméto. In Act I, Feréo waits for a response from the oracle but is met by Alceste, Adméto's wife, who informs him that she has intercepted the response. She explains that Adméto's life will be spared if someone from his family agrees to die in his place. It soon becomes clear that Alceste has decided to sacrifice herself on her husband's behalf. In Act II, Adméto makes a complete recovery and looks to share the good news with his beloved wife. However, Alceste's own health has begun to fail, and Adméto realizes the nature of Alceste's sacrifice. In Act III, Alceste prepares for death. Adméto angrily confronts his father and demands to know why the older man agreed to let Alceste, who is still in the bloom of life, die on his behalf. In Act IV, the god Ercole appears and learns of Alceste's sacrifice. He agrees to secure her life. Believing Alceste dead, Adméto in his grief refuses to go on living as his wife had wanted and instead declares that he will die by starvation. In Act V, Adméto is met by Ercole, who is accompanied by a veiled woman. Ercole informs him that the gods of Olympus were so moved by his immense love for his wife that they decided to spare Alceste's life. Alceste and Adméto joyfully reunite.