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TARANTISM  
AND  
TARANTELLA  
IN  
*A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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## INTRODUCTION

Echoes of the controversies about the meaning of the drama *A Doll's House* and Nora's character continue to reach us from 1879, the year in which Ibsen completed his probably most famous work in Amalfi.

Up till now, the complexity of the characters and the wise webbing of the drama, scattered of symbolic moments, widening its study, are the cause of divergent interpretations by the scholars.

An example, exemplifying for all the discussions, could be the famous problem of Ibsen's "feminism".

In the chapter "The poetry of feminism" in her book *Ibsen's women* the American scholar Joan Templeton (2001) tries to say a definitive word about the sense to attribute to the drama. She quotes an impressive series of evidences with great accuracy, coming not only from works, but also from specific events and stands of which Ibsen was protagonist, to be opposed to only one point in favour of the detractors of the feminist vision about *A Doll's House*.

The reference is to the famous Banquet in honour of Ibsen seventieth birthday on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1898.

On that occasion, Ibsen, thanksgiving the militant feminists for their toast, had asserted that, thinking also desirable to resolve women's problems, he had had the single scope to describe humanity.

Joan Templeton concludes asking herself and asking to us: can one single declaration, made very 20 years after the composition of the work, refute one enormous amount of affirmations, also violent, made by the Norwegian Master, which attest the exact contrary, and that is that Ibsen had fought with passion in favour of woman's liberation, also, but not only, with *A Doll's House*?

And, as a matter of fact, her reasonings are tightening a lot, much more if Errol Durbach (1991), whose interpretation is founded on Nora's transformation in an aware and thinking human being, 10 years before, in *A Doll's House: Ibsen's Myth of Transformation*, is believed to have supplied one anticipated explanation, also substantially in "feminist" sense, of the dissonance marked by Joan Templeton.

According to Durbach Ibsen would have answered in that way, during the banquet, in order to contrast the tendency to reduce the complex analysis on the freedom in his works about

women to the political of feminine liberation and therefore the “feminist” sense of the works would not have been contradicted by that declaration. (1991: 91)

All absolutely convincing. Therefore, subject closed.

Not at all.

On the opposite side, in fact, of the interpretation of *A Doll's House* as a work that uses the feminine issue, but just as a metaphor of one more general and complex reflection on the problematic of the freedom of the human being, we find a lot of authors and it is worth quoting among the many, a reasoning of Roberto Alonge since it is totally opposite to all that the scholars previously asserted. In his introduction to *A Doll's House* (Alonge 2005), being also inspired by the sharp observations of Georg Groddeck (1985), in a meaningfully entitled paragraph “Nora, that selfnamed feminist”<sup>1</sup>, he asserts that Nora “/.../ goes away not because Torvald is a husband too much father-master, but on the contrary, because too much little father-owner.”<sup>2</sup> (Alonge 2005: 33)

According to Alonge, in fact, it is problematic to consider feminist a character who waits for the “miracle” that will save her: the husband who takes on himself his wife’s faults.

In other words, Nora leaves because Torvald has not protected her as a true knight in the moment of greater difficulty.

And also in this case, all absolutely convincing. How to exit from the *enpasse*?

Which road to take?

Alonge himself warns, with so much shrewdness, that Ibsen: “/.../ it is indeed an unexplored continent, in spite of the appearances.”<sup>3</sup> (2005: 13)

Evidently, to explore *ex novo* a continent demands a technique of observation differing from the one which would be employed in the study of an already totally almost known atmosphere, as it could be, as an example, the drawing-room of a middle-class dwelling.

We must collect meticulous observations, at the moment also apparently insignificant, resisting to the temptation to harmonize them from the start, even with an unconscious job of filing and correction, but having the patience of recording them, waiting for the concordance among them to happen, when possible, almost naturally in the respect of the text and its author.

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<sup>1</sup> Alonge’s original: “Nora, quella sedicente femminista”

<sup>2</sup> Alonge’s original: “/.../se ne va non già perché Torvald sia un marito *troppo padre padrone* bensì, all’opposto, perché *troppo poco padre padrone*.”

<sup>3</sup> Alonge’s original: “/.../è davvero un continente ancora inesplorato, nonostante le apparenze.”

If we read Ibsen from this point of view we have a perception of a wide complexity, such and many are the arguments and the symbols that emerge from his works, and at the same time of new stimulant awareness.

It often happens, in the course of study meetings or in the course of article reading, to hear or read affirmations such as : “Ibsen already more than one hundred years ago speaks to us, prerunning the times”, with the indication of a problem that today is in the center of scientific, psychological, social or political debate, as if Our Author had previewed all with amazing advance.

And it is so, not already in literal terms, but because the careful description of the problematic and human dynamics made by Ibsen turns out to be receptive, so to say, also of those future or only sketched out ones at the age in which the dramas were written.

And however, the specific main themes are always the occasion in order to speak about something else which is higher.

If Dr Stokmann, in order to give another example, in the *Enemy of the people* lets us catch a glimpse of the problem of pollution, of the intrigue of interests of small and great politics, nevertheless Ibsen uses these *present* arguments in order to tell us about something else, but with no denying the importance of such arguments!

Well then, Ibsen had *foreseen*, but because he had *already* seen!

Ibsen, as we know, had a direct and very bitter experience of the upsettings of his world, due to the advancing of the new times, and he learned, with his extraordinary human and poetic sensitivity, to “read” his fellow creatures and their behaviours.

Moreover, he had the capacity to create, through a process of poetic synthesis of opposite direction, meaningful and multifaceted signs and symbols to be used in the wise construction of his plays.

In this way he shaped human dynamics that were not only able to photograph the painful historical and social contemporary context but also to contain the germs of the griefs, the conflicts and the hopes of the future.

In this sense Ibsen had already seen.

Not only, then, the past, that oppresses us with its weight and shadows, but also the future, that hangs over us with the consequences of the human and contradictory pushes of the present.

The present of every human experience that Ibsen has told us, contains the both, sometimes dividing them with difficulty, but more often presenting them in an inextricable web that has the signs of the past and the inklings of the future.

His careful ability to catch every shading of human psychology and to recreate it in his characters and dramas make him therefore a forerunner.

All this wealth and complexity, on the other hand, evidently risks to confuse us and to make us uncertain also on the most consolidated meaning of any of his work.

In order to avoid this danger we do not have to forget to have a “new continent” to explore and must be equipped with a patient and wider vision, so to say.

The vision of a higher and complex Ibsen, far from being banally all-inclusive, gives him back to us extraordinarily fresh and unpredictable, free from the hoary controversies cited previously.

We have said that in the opinion of some authoritative scholars *A Doll's House* substantially remains a feminist drama; others, equally authoritative, reject this interpretation judging it reductive of the widest thematic of human being freedom.

At first sight the approach that I try to give to my reading would seem to be included in the second one. It is not so. Or at least, not only.

In fact, it is also true that the thematic of freedom does include the one of women's freedom, but of sure it does not cancel it. The thematic of women's freedom, it seems to me nearly weird to have to underline it once again, is the main theme in *A Doll's House*, and it's for sure the cue for further general reflections on individual freedom, but, I repeat it, it's one of the central cores of the drama.

It is indeed true that nobody, in fact, also among the critics less inclined to accept Ibsen's “feminism”, can deny it; at the most they reorganize it (or neutralize, according to the feminist militant vision), framing it in more general problems of the freedom of the individual and his relationship with the social institutions.

And this is an error, because a fundamental element of the drama that sends back also to many other most important topics can't and has not to be denied: the one concerning the individual and his role in the society, freedom, power and so on, but it is and remains however also the drama of a woman who does not want to be a doll any more!

And it is true that Nora's rebellion proceeds from very little feminist expectations, on the contrary, frankly male chauvinist, but either denying or marginalizing on these bases Ibsen's interest for the feminist thematic probably would be forced.

There's nothing to prevent, in fact, a character from being self-contradictory in his behaviors, but coherent in the aims.

Nora can very well expect something less than feminist from Torvald and, having not obtained it, she can mark a really feminist turning point and, then, on the ending of the drama, still assume the possibility of a "miracle" that might save their wedding in the future.

But well thinking about it, she does not seem to be convinced of it, and also the kind of miracle that should happen, this time is different from the one evoked in order to save herself from Krogstad's blackmail.

Then again Nora totally feminist?

Neither this, evidently. Or better, not only.

Many are the junctures in which our heroine demonstrates hints of frivolity or even of cynicism that is very little suited to the figure of heroic combatant for a cause. She lies, plays sometimes with cruelty with Rank whose feelings she knows very well, her first encounter with Kristine is imprinted to a tiresome insensitiveness. She is not only an unconscious doll, therefore.

Sometimes she is a skillful manipulator of her small world.

We cannot expect extreme argumentations from a "protofeminist" of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is surprising that all the "most wonderful thing" of the feminist Nora is that she and her husband become a true couple in a true marriage!

Nora goes away from her family in order to know and to develop herself, but her ideal, although she is not anymore so convinced about it, remains, probably in a revised and revolutionized form, in any case the married love.

There is a woman, then, who wants to assert herself as human being with equal rights, but who is still bound to the idea of the marriage. Her strategies are not the ones of a fighter, on the contrary the ones of a wife who remains a wife until the end, although her final action.

From the stratagems that she uses to nibble at cakes to her attempts to let Kristine obtain the employment or to avoid Krogstad's dismissal, she carries out a series of strategies to conduct Torvald to do what she wants, in a conscious and unconscious way.

In the dramatic sequence Nora proceeds behaving not always consistently, exactly because she belongs to a way of doing that is not more functional to her new personal and social events.

This produces aspects that are complex, as well as contradictory, which reflect on one side the old finishing world and on the other side the new one, not yet started.

It is not strange, then, that Nora is overcome by a sense of hopelessness and despair.

It is undeniable, however, that what happens to her at Christmas eve makes her finally aware of which trap has been all her life.

In a moment the plaything breaks and everything that worked before does not work anymore. Moving the focus of the critic a little further, we can notice that *A Doll's House* is the emblematic story of a generalized crisis that invests everybody: Nora as a person, her family, the society around her.

Torvald is going to be made director of a Bank from dark civil servant who was achieving, after years of hard work, the right social status; Krogstad wants to render him his account and to sail towards calmer waters, even with social rehabilitation; Kristine is looking for her role too, under the shape of a steady employment now that she is on her own; Nora hopes for having the life of ease she longed for so much.

Nobody will have in the end what he thought he should obtain: those who will have unexpected gifts will be Kristine and Krogstad, Torvald will know the bitter end of his wedding, Nora the ruin of every illusion.

Not only the mocking game of the plot shocks us, but also the arrival of the unexpected for all.

Nobody has got the tools to face what happens and still the ironic and quite distant Rank collapses miserably in front of Nora's unexpected confidences, revealing her his love.

But also for him the instruments to manage the new situation are unfit. He will perhaps have what he was waiting for only in the end, but it will be his death sentence.

The picture that little by little emerges, if we take a distance from the drama, is the ruin of a world and its rules.

Just like in a Chinese box game, as we go away from Nora, we see her wedding, her education, her affections, her family, her entire frame of reference splitting together with its rules, conventions and illusions, in short, breaking everything into pieces.



The money is always present in close up or in the background of the speeches of the characters and, in an unstoppable and continuous process, it manages to modify the macro and microcosm of the drama. It is the motivation and the means for the longed changes that everyone tries to make in his own life.

The characters move unconscious in these dynamics, try to manage the imponderable with the old usual tools, but, to keep to the point, it is just as if they used a no longer in circulation currency to try to settle their account.

And that's why the "miracle", that Nora longs for so much, does not happen.

It was about a dream, beautiful to dream when the danger was far away, but useless and grotesque when the destiny with the rough aspect of Krogstad knocks at the door.

Nora understands, at this point, a fundamental thing: the system does not work anymore and it is useless to repair the worn out old rules.

It is necessary to go beyond the context and try to learn new abilities for a new world.

She cannot remain in a past that does not exist any more.

The great emotional impact that has always had the final moment of the drama, when Nora slams the door, resides evidently in the fact that the noise that comes from the bottom of the stage, shakes in the spectator and in the reader a blend of strong feelings connected with the moment, that we could say archetypical, of the end and the contemporaneous beginning.

It's the pain of a surgical wound that it begins to heal in the same moment in which it is inflicted: it carries with itself the healing or, at least, the hope for it.

It is obvious, at this point, that my aim is to consider and eventually to integrate, where possible, the many interpretative sources that can derive also from different points of view, inside a perspective that privileges a deeper, multisided vision of what in my opinion is the drama of the clash of two ages, of the end of an idea of the world that is displaced by another one, not even very well delineated.

When Ibsen writes his social dramas, he refers to the industrialized, bourgeois and capitalistic society that is arising just in his times. Both in Norway and in Europe there were transformations in all the fields, from the economy and the way of producing to the way of living and to the cultural values shared by people.

Jon Nygaard (2006) underlines in "Ibsen's vision of Identity, Freedom and Power" a very important aspect that can be reassumed as the spirit of those time: freedom.

In his analysis of the historical and social context of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he remarks that nothing was anymore fixed and unchangeable, everything was possible, the world was full of opportunities for everyone.

But together with nice effects, there were also difficult ones. Not everybody had the courage to risk on his own, to struggle for a better position in society: many people felt disoriented, lost in a too big and unknown world, where the old friendship relations were substituted by work's interests while the family's foundations were dissolved in anonymous and stranger organizations.

Moreover, the proclaim of freedom and of being oneself was continuously disclaimed by the rigid rules of the new institutions, that constrained and frustrated the free impulses in their necessity to regulate the otherwise chaotic world of capitalism.

What was the fortune for somebody was the ruin for someone else, in a highly competitive and cynic social context, where the counterpart of freedom was isolation.

People experienced isolation not only from the environment but also in relation with their own internal values and ideals, derived from the past and not yet suitable to the new cultural frame.

If they were attracted by the dynamic, intense and free world outside them, at the same time they were scared exactly by this world, and they retired more and more inside themselves.

Ibsen's times were characterized by a complex and suffering passage from the old society, that can be defined as pre-modern, to the new modern society. This is what Nygaard (1998) speaks about in his "Ibsen and the Drama of Modernity".

He stresses the concept of a "double drama of modernity": first of all the drama of the social transformation, with all the economical and cultural upsettings; then the drama of the interior conflict of the persons, divided between the past and the future, the will to change and the devotion to the past.

Ibsen lived this "double drama" in a direct and painful way in his life. The sudden collapse of his family's wealth and social condition into a miserable one and the consequent separation from his native place were surely determinant in his reflection on the social and existential problems that we find in his later social plays.

This is the reason, as Nygaard underlines, why the artist understood so deeply the tragic nature of his age.

On this point he reports, in "Ibsen og «det modernes» drama" (1996: 7), what Ibsen wrote to Brandes in 1872 as a response to his book about the literary currents in Europe.

The Norwegian Master shows his awareness of the times' change and his skeptical position in confront of modernity:

Hvad der kommer ud af denne kamp på kniven imellem to epoker, det ved jeg ikke; alt andet heller, end det bestående; det er for mig det bestemmende. Af sejren lover jeg mig ikke egentlig nogen stabil forbedring: al udvikling har hidtil ikke været andet end en slingren fra den ene vildfarelse over i den anden. Men kampen er god, frisk, sund; /.../<sup>4</sup> (Ibsen H.U. XVII: 32)

What Ibsen does in his social plays is to describe the society in its complexity and contradictions, as he sees it, raising doubts rather than giving answers.

He just shows how tragic the condition is, of the modern individual, free to create his own destiny but incapable to do it, with a fragmented identity and a feeling of complete isolation.

I think that in *A Doll's House* these topics are very strong, not only explicitly in the narrative settings, but also implicitly in the "apparently smaller" symbolic situations.

The famous Nora's Tarantella, as an example, has been examined and studied from thousand visual angles, with the common characteristic, in all the authors, of an interpretation that emphasizes the erotic-seductive and Dionysian implications over other possible meanings.

Remaining faithful to what I mentioned before, I will analyze it in the light of my general vision of the drama and of some recent very interesting findings and observations that, in my opinion, not denying the previous readings, offer remarkable cues of reflection and search.

My aim is to demonstrate that the dance at issue is a symbol of incurable conflict between two worlds, two ages and so it preludes to and emphasizes the shocking final change of Nora. As I will try to explain in this work, Nora's dance assumes several meanings.

It has the function to give her the possibility of postponing Torvald's discovery of Krogstad's blackmail, but it becomes an evident sign of the end of the relationship previously existing between her and Torvald.

The dance was a mean of seduction and at the same time of gratification, that well represented the course of the Helmer's marriage. Nora pleased Torvald, she probably manipulated him through her affected performance dressed as a young Napolitan fisher.

This about the past.

But when Nora resolves to commit suicide, she dances without any rule, frightened and taken by an odd frenzy, that is very unpleasant for Torvald.

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<sup>4</sup> My translation: "What it will be in this battle between two ages, I don't know; everything but not the existing; this is for me the determining. About the winner, I don't see any stable improvement: all the development has not been, until now, anything else than a twist from an illusion to another. But the battle is good, healthy, fresh; /.../ "

Moreover, the evening after, during the masked ball at Stenborg, she arouses the husband's lechery in a surely very improper moment for her.

What was the symbol of a communication, although complicated and contradictory, becomes the symbol of an irremediable breaking.

In the background the world of the Helmer before Christmas breaks into fragments under the pressing new world, that takes possession of the scene.

The cue for these reflections derives also from the lecture of Arve Nordland (2006), "*A Doll's House* - southern Italy influence - an alternated key interpretation" at the *XI International Ibsen Conferance* in which he assumes positively that Nora is suffering from Tarantism.

Tarantism was a complex collective syndrome, that, in its individual manifestations, today we would define in an imperfect way, comparable to the melancholy. It was common in Southern Italy from the Middle Age (about the 9<sup>th</sup> century ) until the recent times (middle 20<sup>th</sup> century), and it was thought provoked from the bite of a spider and curable only with the music and the dance, from which it would be derived the so called Tarantella dance.

Nordland founds his idea on two fundamental facts.

John Paulsen remembers as Ibsen recommended him to read the book of the Danish researcher Wilhelm Bergsøe on Tarantella (Paulsen 1913: 98).

The Italian scholar Franco Perrelli found some years ago in Copenhagen Bergsøe's book (1865), rendering sure what before it could be considered a founded supposition: that Ibsen, who was Bergsøe's friend and travelling companion, knew about the origin of Tarantella from Tarantism.

These two facts, also leading me to different conclusions from those of Nordland, as we will see later on, motivate also my search, that is intent to demonstrate, starting from the analysis of Bergsøe's text, that Ibsen has used Tarantella as precise sending back to the phenomenon of Tarantism, and so to derive from that a particular interpretation of the scene of the crazy dance of Nora.

My study, naturally, will not neglect other authoritative contemporary or previous sources on the matter of Tarantism, that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in the centre of a very lively scientific debate, especially in the Napolitan intellectual circles with which Ibsen came into contact during his stayings in Southern Italy.

The chapter on Tarantism will be centred on the study of the most important acquisitions of the modern cultural anthropology about it. This means to speak about the skillful works of Ernesto De Martino (1961) in the 50ies.

It's sure that Ibsen could not foresee the contemporary anthropology that, therefore, cannot be used like direct source, but it can be instrument of aid for a more correct interpretation of a material that, for its poetic-symbolic essence, can contain inside also features that only instruments deriving from surveys of subsequent ages help us to catch.

It will be also interesting to search, among the ancient Greek rituals probably at the origin of Tarantism, those that seem to have interesting analogies with some images of *A Doll's House*.

I want to specify that my reflections will also be based on my personal little research in the field. I have been in fact in Salento and I have listened to the stories of some old eyewitnesses of Tarantism. This experience has permitted me to not only understand better what I had read before, but also to get a precise feeling, very useful for me.

All the people I spoke to had in common a certain embarrassment, if not bother in facing up to the topic.

This reaction helped me to understand and emphasize a less considered aspect, in my opinion, of Tarantism.

I think, in fact, that Tarantism was also and first of all a collective instrument of reintegration in a social order.

From the witnesses' embarrassment I have felt the sense of shame and of implicit distancing of the social body towards the sick people, the so-called "tarantati".

If it is true that they were healed with the music and the dance, this happened however not in order to give them the possibility to live a better life, but to reintegrate them in the same context that had provoked the conditions of their spiritual sufferings.

I will try to demonstrate that Ibsen, knowing Bergsøe's treatise, has deliberately chosen a symbol that sends back to a suffering phenomenon. A phenomenon that is not only individual, but also and above all, collective.

Tarantella, therefore, as a symbol of a pre-modern ritual, that doesn't work anymore in the dramatic modern of the new world of the Helmer.

The verification of these interpretative possibilities will naturally pass also through the comparison with those views of Nora's Tarantella that I think worthy of noting the originality and the organic unity of the study on it.

I will therefore use the documentary analysis of the interpretative sources of the scene of Tarantella coming from the many Ibsenian scholars.

Besides the ones that have provided a greater analysis organicity and completeness, I will give prominence also to those that have caught some aspects that, although lesser, in my opinion are meaningful in order to achieve as much as possible a complex and articulated interpretation.

Following a temporal criterion in the listing of the studies, I will then highlight those perspectives or elements that I believe particularly enriching in my vision of Tarantella.

Such comparison will serve to verify and to underline my key of interpretation of the entire drama in the sense of a representation of an epochal crash between some not compatible worlds.

Therefore *A Doll's House* as a drama of modernity.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**TARANTELLA IN A *DOLL'S HOUSE*.**  
**IBSENIAN SCHOLARS' VIEWS**

Nora's Tarantella is such an important dramatic moment in the context of *A Doll's House* that all the scholars have tried to explain its meaning according to their interpretation of the play. Generally every scholar agrees in tributing Tarantella dance the meaning of a critical passage from the first to the second part of the play. Everyone seems to share the opinion that the dance symbolizes eroticism and sensuality on one side, frenzy and change on the other side. Moreover, most of the scholars share the opinion that Tarantella establishes a contact with the symbolism of Tarantism.

About the symbols and the signs that occur in Ibsen's plays, differently from John Northam (1952), that thinks that they were conscious constructions of the writer, Jon Nygaard (1996) highlights how Ibsen used them as an expression of what was "typical" of his times but without being completely conscious of their meaning.

What was typical of Ibsen times was in fact the uncertainty, the doubt, the loss of any reference point, that characterized the arriving and establishing of Modernity.

For Ibsen er symbolene uttrykk for hva som er det typiske i hans samtid. Men hva disse symbolene faktisk betyr, er han seg neppe bevisst. Han må leses som et symptom og ikke som årsak. Derfor er symbolene og tegnene, som den moderne tilstanden de vil uttrykke, alltid tvetydige. Ibsen spør, han svarer ikke. Betydningen av symbolene er derfor en forståelse eller fotolkning som vi kan tilføre i etterkant og utenfra<sup>5</sup> (Nygaard 1996: 5-6)

Significant, on this point, are Ibsen's words (Nygaard 1996:6) about Andreas Munch's *Lord William Russell*, highly appreciated by the writer exactly because of its ambiguous meaning: "han [Munch] har ladet den symbolske Runeskrift staa der uden Kommentar, overladende det til hver Enkelt at fortolke den efter sit individuelle Behov"<sup>6</sup> (Ibsen H.U. XV: 163)

This means that all the comprehensions and interpretations that we can give Ibsen's symbols depend very much on our historical and cultural horizon, at least not on the writer's only one.

It is in this light that I will rely on Ibsen's scholars' approaches.

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<sup>5</sup> My translation : "For Ibsen the symbols are expression of what is typical in his age. But what these symbols mean, he is probably not conscious of. He should be read as a symptom and not as a cause. Therefore the symbols and the signs are, like the modern condition they want to express, always ambiguous. Ibsen asks, he doesn't give answers. The meaning of the symbols is therefore a comprehension or an interpretation that we can add after and from outside".

<sup>6</sup> My translation : "he lets the symbolic Runes be there without comments, leaving it to everybody, so that they can be interpreted according to every individual need"

Daniel Haakonsen (1948), in “Tarantella motivet i «Et dukkehjem»”, puts his attention on the aspect of the masquerade of Tarantella, that Nora performs dressed as a Neapolitan fishergirl. All the life of Nora is a masquerade, under which she has no identity: a sign of it is given by Torvald’s nicknames for her.

In the moment in which she is constrained by the facts to act as a real person and not as a mask, she is unable to do that. Her underdeveloped personality prevents her from speaking in an adult way with Torvald and she is taken by an enormous and undefined fear, an anxiety stronger than the reason. Her state of mind is extremely confused and she thinks of suicide.

In front of Krogstad’s explanation of the uselessness of such an act, she has no other way of escape but the madness. (Haakonsen 1948: 269).

Tarantella, that Nora is forced to dance by the danger and the loss of reference’s points, is a desperate expression of her tragic interior condition, as we understand from the wildness of her performance.

As a dance of recovering from the madness of the spider’s bite, Tarantella has the power to heal Nora. After the dance, in fact, she reemerges matured and able to look in the eyes her death.

Shocked by Torvald’s reaction to the letter of Krogstad, Nora compares the masquerade-life that she has lived and the desperate dance that she was forced to dance.

It’s the moment in which she decides to throw away the masquerade-dress.

In Haakonsen’s words: “/.../ når Nora sammenfatter karakteristikken av det liv hun har ført i Helmers hus, så gjør hun det ved hjelp av et bilde som står i nær sammenheng med maskeraden og dermed med tarantella-symbolet”<sup>7</sup> (1948: 273)

Laura Caretti (1987), in “La didascalia nella letteratura teatrale scandinava: testo drammatico e sintesi scenica”, compares the draw of the drama with the final copy.

She notes that in the draw Nora sings Anitra’s song from *Peer Gynt* and she dances as an odalisque.

This is very interesting, because the scene is very different in its dramatic impact.

Tarantella dance, that she sees as “a play within the play” (1987: 44), offers to us both the feelings of Nora, her laughter and her upset and, at the same time, it marks the passage from the first to the second part of the drama, the two faces of Nora and the two faces of the drama.

From the laughters of the first part to the upsetting of the second.

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<sup>7</sup> My translation: “/.../when Nora understands the type of life she has conducted in Helmer’s house, she does it with the help of an image that is in strong relation with the masquerade and so with Tarantella-symbol”



With its double aspect of dance, happy and frenzy, elegant and irregular, wild and seductive, Tarantella is, then, a central element that gives Ibsen the opportunity to introduce a double registry.

She also suggests that maybe in the stagings of the drama, the dance that Torvald offers as a show to the friends at Stenborg (and that we don't see on the scene) was more important than the one that we see in the rehearsal scene.

Caretti notes that Ibsen had "read the books" about Tarantism but she suggests also other sources, as the verses of Snoilsky about Masaniello revolt - the drum as a symbol of rebellion - and the 19<sup>th</sup> century ballets, as *Napoli* of A. Bournonville and *Tarantule* of J. Coralli Pieracini, in which the protagonist dances Tarantella first as an expression of joy and then of horror for the bite of the spider. (1987: 46).

Caretti remarks that Tarantella has been considered by some critics a kind of tribute to the tradition of theatrical artifices, that Ibsen generally didn't love.

This is the reason why the critics disapproved his choice. Eleonora Duse, for example, cut off the scene of the dance and started the third act dressed as Arlequin, reinventing the scene and encountering the appreciation of the English critics, that didn't like the dissonance of the original scene with the rest of the play. (Caretti 1987: 48)

Also Sandra Saari (1988), in "Female Become Human: Nora Transformed" develops the comparison between the draw and the final copy of the play.

Saari wants to demonstrate that Ibsen, after his stay in Amalfi, changed his idea of a drama based on two different moral worlds, the male and the female, ruled by male laws.

One and only humanity, this was his new intuition, governed by gender related laws that were imposed by the social context.

The fact that in the South of Italy the differences between men and women are pronounced and more recognizable than in other cultural contexts means exactly that they are not innate, but imposed by social structures.

The rehearsal of Tarantella, notes Saari, is the first moment in which Nora doesn't take heed of what Torvald commands.

Saari, like Caretti, highlights that, while in the draw of the drama Nora sings Anitra's song from *Peer Gynt*, dancing with shawls, "in the final copy Nora does not sing and dance graceful obeisance", as she does in the draft. (Saari 1988: 43)

In the final copy, instead, we have Tarantella, that is a mean for Nora to express her inner feelings. The dance is the expression of the fear for the death, that cannot be confided, “ but that she tries to stave off”. (1988: 43)

The Napolitan dance, in fact, is linked by Saari with the bite of the mythical spider, “as either a cure or a consequence.”( 1988: 43).

In the masquerade ball Tarantella, on the other hand, is “ the boldly flirtatious couple dance whose effect is to release Torvald’s sensuality.”(1988: 45)

In this context the dance, according to Saari, is used by Ibsen to connect the expression of male sensuality with Italy.

Errol Durbach (1991) highlights the psychic aspects of her behaviour, showing the capacity of Ibsen to go behind the appearances of the reality, to reveal the secret forces that govern the subconscious world of the individuals.

Tarantella is for Durbach first of all a “performance” of the torments of Nora’s interiority.

Her repressed feelings are not allowed to come out in her marriage, the only way she can express them is through a performance.

And her performance is wild and hysteric. The domestic world of the “doll’s house” is entered by the indomitable force of the “Dionysian dithyramb”, that unchains Nora’s deepest instincts, showing aspects of her subconscious universe that until now were completely unknown to us and to herself:

We “know” Nora not only as the romantic poet of the miracle but as the woman who dresses and dances and who stands most articulately revealed as a frenzied maenad, draped in a gaudy shawl, banging a tambourine and whirling out of control, her hair tumbling round her shoulders. (Durbach 1991: 43)

Through the dance Nora liberates herself from her sexual doll’s role. She reacts with violence to the image of the perfect Napolitan fishergirl “souvenir”, symbol of her marital life as sexual submission and female power in relation with Torvalds fantasies.

Tarantella is therefore a symbol of Nora’s constraining illusions that belong to her previous life and, at the same time, a symbol of her aware destruction of them in order to be free.

It means that we are in front of a transformation from an old existence to a new one.

Durbach refers to the original meaning of the dance to highlight its power of death and rebirth.

*/.../* the Napolitan Tarantella [is] the dance of the victim of the tarantula spider, and the delirious attempt of the body to rid itself of the poison. This is not the customary sexual titillation that Torvald has come to expect of Nora’s performance. This dance is her struggle for life, a swallowing and a spitting out of death in an act that projects its horror in the very

process of transcending it. Above all, it is a great transformative mystery, a metamorphosis of the quaint Napolitan doll into the suffering woman/.../ (1991: 52)

The process of Nora's awareness of her doll's dimension is characterized, according to Durbach, by a discovery of morality.

Raised to her embarrassing conscience already in the previous confrontation with Rank and Krogstad, her "meretricious impulses of dollydom" are painfully abandoned in the dance,

*.../a moment of moral education and spiritual self-discovery for Nora: a painful relinquishment of the doll, the father's plaything, and the husband's toy...It is, indeed, a death. But it is also a change to the full and suffering life of a self-reliant, responsible free spirit. (Durbach 1991: 53)*

Nora's rebirth will bring her to leave Torvald, worth of any self-sacrifice after his awful revelation of egoism and meanness.

Nora will not die, but she will be alone in the uncertainty of the life.

As a counterbalance of her positive transformation, Ibsen leaves her in a tragic dimension, where she has become "free from not yet free to".

This is the dimension of the modern times.

"The emergent self, unshaped and vulnerable, must find its consolation in the possibility of *becoming* its own essential creation by vigilant warfare against the Trolls that lurk in the valves of the heart and the folds of the brain". (Durbach 1991: 90)

The analysis of Tarantella of Tone Selboe (1997), in "Maskerade – kvinnelighet – frihet. Perspektiver på Henrik Ibsens *Et dukkehjem*", moves from a gender perspective.

She sees Tarantella as a masquerade too, but she arrives at different conclusions from the previous scholars.

The masquerade, for Selboe, is necessary for a woman to reach what she wants in a masculine world, where her role is that of submission to the man.

Nora 's life is a continuous masquerade. She plays the role of a childish woman in order to attract the men and to pursue her aims: in all the situations her behaviour has always been based on lies and tricks, to cover her real intentions.

In the relationship with Torvald her seduction game follows the same pattern.

Completely different is the masquerade of Tarantella. In this dance, where erotism and death (from its ancient ritual meaning) are intimately connected, Nora expresses her deepest feelings: anguish, anxiety, suicidal thoughts. (Selboe 1997: 93)

It's true that she asks Torvald to dance because she wants to delay the action, but she is taken then by the violence of the dance, falling in a state of half trance or madness, beyond her conscious aims.

This means that her dance is authentic. (Selboe 1997: 94)

But also Tarantella is ambiguous: Nora shows her true self, but in a "covered" way, in a "performance", because a woman is not allowed to express her feelings directly in the society. The meaning of Tarantella and of all the play, then, shall not be seen as a passage from a false behavior to a true behavior, but more as a masquerade, in which the relation between true and false is turned over.

/.../ stykket så tydelig viser fram maskeraden som tvetydig, snarere enn å benytte maskeraden som et teatralt grep som fastsetter overgangen fra det falske til det ekte<sup>8</sup> (Selboe 1997: 94)

According to Selboe, Ibsen wants to show that the masquerade is not only a way to reach something, but first of all an ambiguous form of dialoguing.

Very often in the play we find words related to the masquerade, as "doll" and "game", "/.../og [dette] antyder at det kan være vanskelig å avgjøre hva som er forstillelse og hva som er alvor i karakterenes tale"<sup>9</sup> (1997: 88)

When Nora shifts her costume with normal clothes and goes away, she abandons her romantic heroic role to become a realistic being. But this doesn't mean that the play is over: just another is going on, where Nora and not Torvald is the producer: "Men når Ibsen markerer skifte av drakt, antydes det også at spillet ikke er over, men at et annet tar til, der Nora og ikke Helmer er regissøren og iscenesetteren."<sup>10</sup> (Selboe 1997: 95)

In Anne Marie Rekdal's view (2000), as she explains in her book *Frihetens dilemma - Ibsen lest med Lacan*, Tarantella, that is a dance of death, has a melodramatic character.

Tarantella takes its name from a spider that, according to the the Italian legends, bites its victim mortally. The only way to get rid from its poison is to dance.

Tarantella's scene means therefore an existential changing. Nora dances at acme of a process of acceleration of anxiety, on the border of the madness.

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<sup>8</sup> My translation: "/.../the play shows very clearly the doubleness of the masquerade, rather than using the masquerade as a theatrical mean to fix the passage from the false to the true"

<sup>9</sup> My translation: "/.../and this points to the fact that it is difficult to discover what is false and what is serious in the characters' speaking".

<sup>10</sup> My translation: "But when Ibsen underlines the change of the clothes, it is also suggested that the game is not finished, but that another one is taking over, where Nora and not Helmer is the director and the stage manager".

Torvald, astounded by her movements and provoked by Rank, that plays piano in his place, stops the friend, because in his opinion Nora is mad!

Tarantella is a dance of death and it is a process of reparation too. It expresses at the same time anxiety and pleasure.

Nora's frenzied dance is a symbol of death for renaissance. She is an ego-mask in Tarantella. Happiness is eating "macaroons" but also being able to say "death and pain": on one side the "wonderful", on the other side the fright.

Like in the relationship between Nora and Rank, death and erotism are present also in Tarantella.

Anxiety, death and madness on one side and erotism on the other are equally present in the conception of the "real" of Lacan. The erotism saves the desire from the selfdestruction.

Tarantella, therefore, in its combination of anxiety almost as madness and vital feeling of enjoyment, works as a repairing process.

Franco Perrelli (2002), in "Some more notes about Nora's Tarantella", identifies the most probable sources of inspiration of Tarantella dance in *A Doll's House*, among which first of all Bergsøe's book.

Starting from the ancient sources about Tarantism and giving relevance to the central analysis of De Martino, he underlines the connection between Tarantella and the ritual dances of Tarantism.

He remarks, moreover, that Tarantella, a device that had been used very often in the theatre, like in the famous *Napoli* of Bournonville, and that had become a "scrap" in the theatrical tradition, was revitalized by Ibsen, that filled it with new meanings.

Like Haakonsen, he considers Tarantella the symbol of Nora's changing and healing from madness.

"The archaic ritual releases a catharsis" and Nora's "modern tragedy" can start. (Perrelli 2002: 131)

Beret Wicklund (2003), in "Death and Pain- Liberation and Infection in *A Doll's House*", says: "/.../the Tarantella dance is what brings up the revelation of Torvald Helmer's true nature". (2003: 40)

She highlights that Tarantella has three functions.

The first is Nora's desperate attempt to keep Torvald's attention away from the letterbox.

The second is an image of her marriage, in which she is a bird that sings (and dances) to entertain her husband.

The third is referred to the myth of Tarantism: if you are bitten by the spider, you have to dance in a frenzy to let the poison come out of the body with the sweat.

In this specific case the poison is the true nature of Torvald that reveals itself.

For him the primary values are pride and honour, not love and care.

According to Wicklund, therefore, it's a question of opposition between male and female values.

Love and care, Nora's values, are strictly linked with death and pain, that are not allowed in a "doll's house".

"Tarantella is a spider", the Aracne of the Greeks, a goddess of the European culture, that has a parallel in the "weaving norne" in the Norwegian mythology.

The spider goddess sits in the center of the world and spins the thread of life, controlling the humane fate. It represents an existence in which life, death and pain are accepted as aspects of a complete life.

The spider's symbol, therefore, means that *A Doll's House* talks about the needs of cultural changes on a deep level, rather than of problems of equality between men and women on a political level.

Ibsen's women, for Wicklund, testify that "the wonderful" is a society based upon female values that follow natural feelings and that accept all the aspects of life: love and care, but also death and pain.

The metaphor of Tarantella as a masquerade of Nora's life is developed and enriched by Erik Østerud (2005) in his essay "Nora's Tarantella: sex, sensuality and death", in which he connects Nora's dance with the Italian cultural background.

Starting from the same concept of Nygaard about modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as an epoch of secularization and change, where the ideals, the myths and the rites of the past persist to live in the secret recesses of the individuals' mind, Østerud underlines the battle that Nora has to fight against the "archaic" layer of her psyche to go towards the future.

According to his interpretation, Nora's way of living is immersed in an "ancient conception of History", where all the events are predetermined by the destiny and there is no possibility to change them.

The good Fortune can suddenly become bad Fortune and all the happiness disappear.

This conception of life is related by Østerud to the Italian cultural tradition of Carnival, the old catholic rite with pagan origins, linked with the seasons' passage in a primitive horizon of cyclic and static conception of the time. (Østerud 1997:77)

Carnival is immediately associated with the image of the masquerade, characterized by a spirit of abandon and joy.

But Carnival is also proceeding to Lent, when people are sad, pray and don't eat meat until Easter, Christ's resurrection.

The life of Nora and Torvald is represented in the play as a Carnival "masquerade", in the sense that they look happy and in love with each other, in good health and wealth, with three nice children, they are in Carnival time.

But behind their happiness is hidden a sense of grief and the fear for unhappiness: maybe Lent is already coming, maybe the old bad Fortune, that they know so well from the recent past, is coming again.

Their reaction to such a terrible possibility is the "masquerade": they don't want to see anything bad that belongs to the period of Lent, they want to live their Carnival in full joy, as if it should never finish. They choose to exclude reality and to live in a wonderful dream, out of time.

Time for them is only related to the past, to its memories and repetitions, not to the future.

According to Østerud, their way of living can be defined as "aesthetical - erotic": every action shall be aimed to reach a formal perfection, it shall be artistic, without unpleasant aspects.

All the bad things shall be hidden and repressed, in order to maintain and to protect the perfect happiness.

While Torvald's role is to guide Nora, Nora's role is to be the cheerful girl, maybe sometimes irresponsible, but always enthusiastic and nice. (Østerud 2004: 150)

The type of love that they share is defined by Østerud as "eros", a game of seduction and fantasy, where Torvald is the "eye" and Nora is the "object".

In reality Nora has a much more complex personality and she is not only a cheerful and light girl. She has shown in the past a different behaviour, based on responsibilities and renunciations for Torvald's sake, in name of what is by Østerud defined as "agape" (the Greek word that indicates love as self sacrifice).

If now she acts differently, it is because she tries to enjoy so much as possible her Carnival, a period that she knows is of transitory nature.

Her “double” personality, responsible and irresponsible, happy and unhappy, is consequent to her vision of the life and it generates a state of continuous anxiety and fear for the future.

It’s like if she lives on the border between Carnival and Lent, in that “liminal room” where the passage from joy to grief is not yet happened and all flows in a state of disorder.

It is not the cosmological order and regularity of the Carnival and fasting rituals that Nora has adopted, but rather the disorder of liminality. The double rituality of carnival and lent lives within her as a time neurosis, a state of total uncertainty - a permanent hysteria. (Østerud 2005: 162)

The dance of Tarantella is the perfect metaphor of Nora’s conception of love and life.

As a masquerade, the dance represents Nora’s Carnival, where she expresses her attachment to life and her erotic love for Torvald. Her performance, in fact, is “ a highly eroticized version of the original dance” (2005: 159), where she corresponds to Torvald’s aesthetic demand of seduction and artistic behaviour.

In the mean time, like in Carnival time, the dance is the expression of her fear of the end of Carnival and of the coming Lent.

It expresses therefore her deep anxiety and her sacrificing love for Torvald, to whom she offers her life in an extreme act of agape. (2004: 156-157)

That’s the reason for which she loses control in the dance, while Torvald tries to give her a discipline: he doesn’t understand her behaviour, because he doesn’t know her desperation and will to die.

As a rite of healing from the deadly poison of the spider , – according to the popular belief -, Tarantella has at the same time both the power of life and the power of death.

In its violent struggle between these two forces, “/.../it incarnates the world of Nora’s life, it expresses in intensified form the horizon of interpretation, the cosmos within which she lives”. (Østerud 2004: 157)

But Tarantella is also a symbol of the marriage of Nora and Torvald, representing its “fatal” moments: the Carnival feast for Torvald’s rehealing in Capri, at the beginning of their marriage; the preparation for the feast, in the scene of the “theatre within the theatre”, where Torvald has the role of instructor and Nora the role of actress, as a representation of their daily life; off stage, as a “prelude” to the confrontation and the final break of their marriage. (Østerud 2005: 157-158)



In Østerud's interpretation, in conclusion, Tarantella an expression of the dramatic process of Nora's passage from the past to the new. It is her last beautiful action in the timeless, ritual and sacred world of the past, where she still believes in her life and love.

Her real change will happen in front of the cynic and egoistic reaction of Torvald, that destroys all her wonderful realm of dreams and illusions.

In this moment she abandons the old world to start a new life, based on words and confrontation and not on images and seduction.

Her concept of time becomes modern, based on movement and action.

"Hope is the voice of the future, while memory is that of the past" (Østerud 2004: 166)

Toril Moi (2006), in her book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, remarks that the human body is the best image of the human soul. Tarantella represents the "cogito" of the body of Nora. (2006: 334)

Her dance can be linked with the hysteria : the body expresses what can't be said in words.

But Nora is not a medical case. Instead, Tarantella is a battle to make her existence be heard.

Nora dances as in a trance, as in a condition of madness.

Just like if she is the body to which Torvald reduces her.

The overdramatization of Tarantella tells us that sometimes it is necessary to exaggerate, in order to show ourself and to be understood by the others.

Tarantella represents at the same time theatricality and authenticity and this is the core of the modernity of Ibsen.

Only the audience can understand this double aspect and Ibsen wants to show that this is something belonging to everyone of us.

Arve Nordland, (2006) gives a very peculiar interpretation of *A Doll's House* and Tarantella. He is convinced that Ibsen used for his characters a lot of attitudes and behaviors described by Bergsøe in his treatise on Tarantism.

After a short discussion about the features of Tarantism, Nordland starts to indicate some symbolic moments and figures that allow him to find links with the cultural horizon of South Italy.

He suggests, quoting an old evidence of Valletta reported by Bergsøe, that a noblewoman of Lucera, in Apulia, subject to Tarantism, could have been the model for *A Doll's House*, and not Laura Kieler.

For eight years, since she had been bitten by the the poisonous spider Tarantula, this woman danced in precise periods of time. The last time she danced for three days and, in the last day, she left the multicolour dressings and wore ordinary clothes.

From the plot of *A Doll's House* we know that Nora was in Capri eight years before the action's start, that the play lasts three days and that Nora changes her clothes in the end.

Nordland underlines that all the doll's behaviours of Nora are typical of people affected by Tarantism.

He counts eight times in which Nora smiles and hums cheerfully, four times in which she claps her hands and three times in which Nora tosses her head. The urge of clapping hands is "the most popular cliché of tarantism". (Nordland 2006:7)

Other possible elements suggesting links with Tarantism, for example, are the sword, that Nora gives her child as a present, the shiny objects, as Torvald's coat's button, that attracts Nora's attention.

Moreover, Nora gives "great attention to her fancy costumes" (2006: 8), she has lack of memory (she doesn't recognize Kristine), she probably tore up her dance costume and so on. All signs that trace back to Tarantism.

After these observations Nordland, quoting Ibsen's granddaughters, underlines that the famous final of the play was very probably dictated by his wife Suzanne, that was involved in the feminist debate for women's rights, because Ibsen never completely enjoyed the feminist end of the play. (2006: 12)

The positions of the scholars above examined are in my point of view very important. Everyone emphasizes or discloses a significant feature for the interpretation's work.

Some of them can present also strainings, but they are all interesting in order to understand the meaning of Nora's dance.

It seems possible to me to pick out a fundamental significance: a healing rite in connection with the symbolic bite of the Tarantula, linked, in an explicit or implicit way, with Tarantella dance.

Already Haakonsen considers the wild dance of Nora an expression of her tragic inner condition and, at the same time, a therapeutic instrument that infuses in her soul the courage to face up the suicide, changing her from a child to an adult.

The polyvalent and ambiguous aspect of the dance performed by Nora during the rehearsals, - the only one that we see in action on the stage -, is underlined in many ways by the scholars.

For Caretti it is both a seduction and an expression of rage and despair, that marks the passage from the first to the second part of the play; for Saari it takes shape as cure and consequence of the events, expressing Nora's fear of the death, that she wants to push away; for Rekdal the dance contains in itself the anxiety for the death and the vital desire of the "eros", that saves Nora from the selfdestruction.

Wicklund, referring to the Greek goddess Arakne, sees Tarantella as the expression of the complexity of the female world, based on love and care on one side and on death and pain on the other side, in opposition with the male universe, characterized by pride and honour.

On this point, Wicklund's parallel with the goddess Arakne, also if interesting, seems to me not very pertinent, because its link with the Apulian spider is feeble, as it is underlined by De Martino in *The land of the remorse*. He considers it an original and autochthonous myth, that doesn't find a specific antecedent in the Greek mythology.

A double aspect of death and life in Nora's Tarantella is underlined also in the analysis of Østerud, in relation with his theory of Carnival and Lent. Nora's dance, according to him, is expression of the psychic instability of Nora, constantly divided between "eros" and "agape" and therefore prey to a permanent "time neurosis".

The relation with Carnival, interesting and deep for its symbolic implications, is respected, evidently, through the masked ball.

Less convincing seems to me the relation of Carnival with Tarantella, also if I think that Østerud's considerations about Carnival and Lent are very effective.

In the Italian popular tradition it can happen that Tarantella is danced during the feasts of Carnival, as for example in Monte Marano's Carnival, in the South of Italy, but their link is not so strong as Østerud imagines.

Carnival has its origin in "Saturnalia", the ancient Roman feasts, in which the god Saturn, corresponding to the Greek Dionysus, dies and resurrects.

They marked the passage of the seasons from winter to spring.

"Saturnalia" were transformed in the form of Lent and Carnival by the Christian religion.

Tarantella, instead, has its origin in the ritual of Tarantism, arisen in the Middle Age and linked with the passage from the spring to the summer.

Also Tarantism is in connection with previous rites, especially with Dionysism, but it was moulded by the Christian religion through the cult of St Paul and not through Lent and Carnival.

Tarantella represents, according to Østerud, the symbol of the marriage of Nora and Torvald, based on the fixity of their roles (Nora as seductive and available and Torvald as her guide), in an immobile dimension of dream and perfection (Carnival), threatened, however, by the constant fear of a hostile destiny (Lent).

In this view Østerud correctly detects not two but three Tarantellas, corresponding to the fatal moments of the couple's life: to the final Tarantella and to the one of the rehearsals he adds, in fact, the dance of Capri.

But I think that it is not possible to desume from the text that Capri's Tarantella was danced in a Carnival feast to celebrate Torvald's healing.

Also Haakonsen's considerations refer to the "masked" dimension of the relation between Nora and Torvald, of which Tarantella embodies the most evident symbol.

According to him, Nora takes finally away her mask in front of Torvald's meanness.

For Selboe, instead, it is not in the passage from the false to the true the core of the play.

She speaks of a "doubleness" of the mask, necessary for Nora to live. As a woman, she is permitted to express herself only through the mask, either to obtain what she wants from her husband or to shout her desperation.

Also in the perspective of Moi the hysteric exaggeration of Nora's dance is functional to her being heard by the surrounding world. The theatricality becomes authenticity.

The analysis of Durbach confirms the interpretation of Tarantella as a rite of positive metamorphosis for Nora, who changes from the "quaint Napolitan doll into the suffering woman".

It is exactly the power of the dance that shakes her deepest instinct, unknown to herself, and that lets her secret suffering come out.

Nora is compared by him to a Maenad possessed by the Dionysian spirit that, through a process of consciousness, becomes free.

The dance, then, has not an erotic connotation, but is "a moment of moral education and spiritual self-discovery".

Also Perrelli attributes a meaning of positive transformation, as a sort of "chatarsis", to the dance of Tarantella, through which Nora acquires a new consciousness of herself.

The dance functions, according to him, as the ritual of Tarantism, that heals from the madness.

Nordland's analysis is the last one in chronological order. On the base of the treatise of Bergsøe, he sees Nora's dance as a true expression of Tarantism.

In connection with the noblewoman of Lucera, that in his opinion could be the model for Nora, I want to underline that from the evidence of Valletta, reported by Bergsøe, it results that this woman was bitten by the spider 7 and not 8 years before her marriage.

The other comparisons seem to me risky, also if captivating. The need of clapping the hands, for example, that Nordland considers as "the most popular clichè of tarantism", is not considered by De Martino like that.

In his book he speaks about the itching in the hands, and clapping the hands is one of the many symptoms and behaviours of the people affected by Tarantism and it is, anyway, of little importance.

Also the lies of the women, in comparison with the ones of Nora, are not a peculiar sign of Tarantism.

In my opinion, Ibsen doesn't take his model for Nora from Bergsøe's treatise and he doesn't describe Nora as a person affected by Tarantism.

But I think that he gets from Bergsøe many ideas, some of which, as the double value of Tarantella (erotic and therapeutic) or the simulation of the "small Carnivals" of the women are used by him, as we will see later, in a poetic manner in *A Doll's House*.

Although dissenting by Nordland's interpretation, I want to underline the importance of the link asserted by him between Ibsen's play and Tarantism.

Before him already Perrelli, with his discovering of Bergsøe's treatise, highlighted such link, without pushing it to the extreme consequences of Nordland.

Perrelli remarks that Nora's Tarantella, on a technical level, is a scenic "scrap, revitalized by Ibsen". He puts in parallel the term "scrap" with the analogous one that De Martino uses to define Tarantism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From the point of view of the psychological and social dynamics of the Helmer's world, I think that Tarantella is itself a "scrap" of communication, that doesn't produce anymore the expected effects, but that marks the definitive crisis of their relation.

Durbach, referring to Maenadism and Dionysism, has stressed the deep meaning of Nora's dance, in connection with the sphere of the psyche and the myth.

It is true that Tarantism has his antecedents in the Greek classical world, referring to Maenadism and Dionysism, but it originated in the Medieval context and in my opinion it had first of all the function of a social control and reintegration.

Tarantella, as Østerud remarks very well, is the symbol of the married life of the Helmer, in its combination of “eros” and “agape” and in its roles’ balance, in an “ancient” or “pre-modern” conception of the history.

It is exactly in the passage from the “pre-modern” to the “modern” world, emphasized with different accents by Durbach, Østerud and Perrelli, that Tarantella, and the Helmer's life, doesn't function anymore.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**TARANTISM AND TARANTELLA.**  
**BERGSØE’S TREATISE**  
**AND THE SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES**

Wilhelm Bergsøe, Danish writer and entomologist, spent in Italy long study periods, between 1861 and 1869. As we know from his roman *Henrik Ibsen paa Ischia og “fra Piazza del Popolo”* (1907), he started in 1867 a friendship with Ibsen in the island of Ischia, near Naples.

In their daily naturalistic walks, the two intellectuals spoke about their ideas and interests. Surely Ibsen knew about Bergsøe’s treatise on the spider Tarantula, the phenomenon of Tarantism and the dance Tarantella.

Bergsøe’s treatise contains, therefore, very useful indications for the investigation of the meaning of Tarantella dance in *A Doll’s House*.

I will refer to its most significant scientific and antropological parts that, presumably, aroused the interest of Ibsen in relation to its choice of inserting Tarantella dance in his play.

The treatise was published in 1865 and its title is *Jagttagelser om den italienske tarantel og bidrag til tarantismens historie i middelalderen og nyere tid*.<sup>11</sup>

It starts with a proper zoological part, where Bergsøe describes, on the base of his direct experience in the fields around Roma –“campagna romana” - the characteristics, the varieties and the habitat, in the South of Italy, of the *Lycosa Tarantula*, a spider considered by the popular imaginary as poisonous and dangerous.

Then he goes over the history of the studies of Tarantism, starting from the Middle Age until his own times. Bergsøe has a scientific perspective, against the magical and superstitious positions, based on beliefs and fears rather than on facts and reasonings.

In this frame he reports some direct or indirect evidencies described by the most famous scholars.

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<sup>11</sup> My translation: “Observations on the Italian Tarantula and a contribution to the history of Tarantism in the Middle Age and in more recente times”

From the merely naturalistic observations Bergsøe moves on to the sociological and anthropological ones, making also a comparison between Tarantism and the dance epidemics spread in Europe in the Middle Age.

On the base of the collected and analyzed data, he exposes in the last part of the treatise his rationalistic and positivistic conclusions: the bite of the Tarantula spider was not dangerous and the illness of Tarantism was due to other causes, in connection with the geographical environment on one side and with the strong social influences which oppressed the sufferers on the other side.

Already in the introduction of his treatise, Bergsøe offers an interesting point of view about Tarantism, when he underlines that the doctors, influenced by the supernatural aspect and the mysticism of the phenomenon, tried to go against it rather than to explain it, creating in this way a big confusion. The recognition that the science ascribed to the dangerous effects of the Tarantula had a great weight on the society, and a greater one on the fragile and ignorant people of the lower classes. (1865: 3)

In relation with the properly zoological part of the treatise, Bergsøe follows the existing study tradition, in which he mentions, among others, the names of Lèon Dufour, Kessler, Duges, Motchoulsky. With regard to the Scandinavian literature, he quotes the name of Sengverds, the only one, according to him, who was interested in the phenomenon. (1865: 5-6)

Referring to Tarantism, Bergsøe precises that he has not seen any case of illness, in decline in his times together with Tarantism's "industry of simulating people", thanks to the growing culture. (1865: 7)

Bergsøe chooses to refer to the scholars that have directly observed the phenomenon and that are considered the most authoritative in the scientific field.

Starting from E. Ferdinando and A. Kircher in the 17th century, through G. Baglivi, L. Valletta and F. Serao in the 18th century, he arrives at the 19th century with S. De Renzi, making some hints also to other scholars, as J. F. C. Hecker and F. Ozanam.

Bergsøe blames all the scholars for their not sufficiently deep analysis of the phenomenon. In particular he is against Hecker, that compares Tarantism with the dance of St Veit, and against De Renzi and Ozanam, that follow the old theories on Tarantism. (1865: 60)

He approves, on the contrary, the position of Serao, the first, already in the 18th century, that rejected the theory of the poisonous bite as the cause of the illness, contributing in this way to determine the end of the phenomenon in the following century, when also the dances of St



Veit, the lychantropy and similar “medieval soul illnesses” disappeared under the light of the science. (1865: 55)

The origin of the illness goes back to the Medieval age, when many dance epidemics were born. But for Bergsøe Tarantism is independent from the other phenomena, it was specifically linked with the geographic area of Apulia and characterized by precise features, as the yearly recurrence of the symptoms of the illness and its connection with the work in the fields.

The illness was very spread in Apulia, in form of recurring epidemics, while in the other parts of Italy there was only some rare case. (1865: 68-69)

Apulia was in the ancient times a rich and fertile land but it became, over the centuries, a desert and very poor area. The inhabitants, according to Bergsøe not belonging to the original Italian race, were irascible, lively and chatty, but with a certain predisposition to psychic problems.

They suffered quick and malignant fevers, with a mortal course, and the hypochondria and mania were frequent.

In this context arose the belief of the dangerous bite of Tarantula; from here took origin the illness of Tarantism, that, excepting the first time, when aggressiveness and violence seemed to prevail, usually manifested itself as hypochondria, that could also bring to death.

The symptoms were very different, Bergsøe supposes that probably there was a confusion with other illnesses, like mania, hysteria, fevers of other nature, syphilis.

After the sting, that could also be insignificant, it was possible to feel strong pain and loss of sensitivity; after that, other symptoms appeared, as nausea, fever, cold, anguish, breathlessness, tiredness, sadness.

The sufferer fell down senseless on the ground and died, if not helped. (1865: 70-71)

The help consisted in the music, that should be of a precise type, that is it should correspond to the character both of the sufferer and of the Tarantula.

When the musicians found the right melody, the sufferer woke up and began to move little by little, until he stood up and started to dance faster and faster.

After some days of uninterrupted dance (with only some breaks), he was healed and this was considered, according to the evidence reported by Valletta, like a miracle. (Bergsøe 1865: 72-73),

If after a year, as it usually happened, the crisis came back, the sufferer was defined a “tarantato”.

Referring to the studies of Ferdinando and Baglivi, Bergsøe enumerates a long series of different symptoms, that he subdivides in three main points: sudden fall, healing through the dance, yearly repetition of the illness. (1865: 75)

In the general opinion, it was a hypochondriac illness, caused by the bite of the spider, with hysterical and maniac phenomena.

But the young men, that worked in the fields and that were easily exposed to the spider's bite, didn't represent the highest number of sufferers, on the contrary the illness affected first of all the women.

According to Baglivi, the women often simulated the illness so that they could participate to the dances; according to Valletta, they gave vent to their sexual instincts. (Bergsøe 1865: 78)

The doctors of those times had a quite passive role and they let the people use the remedy of the music; they recommended to reduce the risk of meeting the spider and they advised against the use of meat in nutrition, because it could exasperate the wish of dancing in the sufferers. (1865: 81-82)

The dance was usually raving.

There were two types of Tarantella: one that was danced by two or more persons; another that was danced alone.

The first was performed in specific places and times and, during the centuries, it acquired a more orderly character, until it became in the 17th century an expression of popular entertainment. It was in this circumstance that the dance was called Tarantella. (1865: 84)

The second Tarantella was considerably wild, because its aim was, in Bergsøe's opinion, to provoke a copious sweating through a growing activity, that exhausted the sufferer.

Sometimes, anyway, the women danced with grace, perfectly following the rhythm of the music.

It was very dangerous to interrupt the music, because the sufferers were taken by a mortal anguish. The same happened when the music was out of tune. (1865: 84-86)

The number of "tarantati" grew year after year: together with the ones that had a new crisis, there were the new sufferers.

For this reason a public music orchestra was organized, which went around all over Apulia every summer, playing in the squares, in the woods, everywhere there was a suitable place to dance. Sparkling objects, bright cloths waved during the dance, jewels, weapons, flowers, vases with water and a lot of green were part of the scenery.

The music was usually very strong, many musical instruments executed quick melodies, producing a sort of ecstasy, like in the ancient Bacchanalia.

The dancers seemed daemons and maenads. They could be happy or sad, furious or melancholic, in accordance with their character and the one of the biting Tarantula.

Some sufferers pretended to be a king or a captain, some women were taken by nymphomania.

Also the spectators were involved in the dances as real or simulating “tarantati”. (1865: 86-88)

According to Baglivi, the phenomenon concerned especially the women because of their repression in the daily life.

The unhappy loves, the difficult existential condition pushed them to simulate the illness, in order to participate in the dances, in a sort of “small Carnival of the women”, together with women that suffered of hysteria or chlorosis. (Bergsøe 1865: 89-90)

The “tarantati” had many idiosyncrasies, like the hate or the attraction for determined colours and objects, as cloths, weapons, mirrors.

The main object of fantasy was the sea. Many wanted to dance inside it and they died drowned. For this reason sometimes they were put on special boats where they could dance in the open sea. (1865: 94-95)

Not everybody wished to dance. Some wandered during the night in the graveyards and they desired to be buried; others wished to be beaten or trampled; others wanted to be cradled or hung and dangled between the branches of the trees.

According to E. Ferdinando, these symptoms belonged to a nervous illness, that could flow into sexual excesses, in melancholy or in suicide. (Bergsøe 1865: 98)

About the later studies, Bergsøe is against the theories that, in the wake of the previous scholars, consider the dance as the effect of the bite of the Tarantula and the music as the mean to heal this status of agitation.

For Bergsøe the opposite is true: who was bitten by the Tarantula fell into a deep melancholy, that could be healed with a copious sweating. This was the reason why the sufferers were stimulated to move and dance with the help of the music:

Man træffer hyppigt i den nyere Tids videnskabelige Haandbøger den Anskuelse fremsat, at Tarantelens Bid fremkaldte et Raseri, der yttrede sig i Dands, som da blev helbredet ved Musik. Men Forholdet/.../er nettop det omvendte. Efter alle Middelalderens og de senere Forfatteres Opgivelser frembragte Biddet en dyb Melancholi, som man stræbte at helbrede ved den Transpiration, hvori Dands eller anden stærk Legemsbevægelse satte de Syge, og

Musiken var netop Midlet til at fremkalde Dandse; thi uden denne var det saa lngt fra, at den Bidte dandsede, at han tværtimod laae udstrakt paa Jorden uden Besindelse.<sup>12</sup> (1865: 99)

Also the music, like the symptoms of the illness, was in relation with the character of the “tarantato” and of the biting Tarantula.

When the musicians didn’t find any melody that the “tarantato” could like, they went to the place where the person had been bitten and they started to play. The melody that provoked the Tarantulas to dance was considered the right melody to heal the “tarantato”.

According to Kircher, the melancholic sufferers preferred the strong sounds; the irascible ones preferred the sounds of cithara and mandolin.

Among the melodies handed down by Kircher, Bergsøe quotes, as the most famous, the *Turchesca*, the *Pastoral*, the *Ottava Siciliana*, *The Red cloth* and the *Green cloth*, the *Spallata*. (1865: 100-101)

Bergsøe remarks that in his times Tarantism had disappeared but that Tarantella was still alive and its exciting and inflamed melodies, as it was possible to see in the gulf of Napoli or in Bournonville’s ballet *Napoli*<sup>13</sup>, had a real *vis magica* that positively influenced the sufferers.

Among the cases of Tarantism that Bergsøe reports from the various scholars, there are two evidences of Valletta that are worth mentioning very syntethically.

The first is the episode of the noblewoman of Lucera. She was a rich lady, married to a public officer. She was bitten by a Tarantula and she danced from then on for 7 years.

Every year she felt sick and she stayed first two weeks in bed. Then the musicians arrived in her room, that was decorated for the occasion with red carpets and two mirrors and there was also a big water container.

At the first tunes of the cithara, she stood up and wore her wedding dress as for a feast, putting on jewels and with her hairs tied back.

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<sup>12</sup> My translation: “We can often find exposed in the later handbooks the idea that the bite of Tarantula provoked a fury that expressed itself in the dance, that was then healed with the music. But the relation.../is exactly the opposite. According to the indications of all the Middle Age and later writers, the bite led to a deep melancholy, that people tried to heal with the sweating, that happened if the sufferers were pushed to dance or to do other strong movements of the body, and the music was exactly the mean that provoked the dance; without the music it was quite impossible to move the sufferer to dance, on the contrary he stayed motionless without senses on the ground”

<sup>13</sup> Bournonville’s ballet *Napoli* or *The Fisherman and his Bride* is from 1842. Ibsen most probably saw it in Copenhagen. In the plot Teresina, being in a boat on the sea with her lover Gennaro, falls in the waves during a storm and she is taken by the nereids to the Blu Grotto in Capri. After that, thanks to the protection of the Madonna dell’Arco, she comes back and she marries with Gennaro at the Sanctuary of Madonna dell’Arco, where all the people dance a lively and vehement Tarantella.

She began to dance beautifully, in a wilder and wilder way, kneeling in front of the instruments. She repeated the dance three times in a day for three days.

The last day she was taken, in the end, by a terrible melancholy and she started to cry desperately. From this moment the woman refused every feast and she wore black clothes. The musicians played sad melodies and she began to dance again, taken by a stronger and stronger anxiety, loosening and tearing out her hair.

In the end she had an uncontrollable fit of weeping and so she fell in a deep sleep.

The day after she was fresh and in perfect health. (1865: 109-110)

The second case is about a poor but respectable and honest woman that, according to the people, was possessed by the daemon.

Arrived to her house, Valletta saw her in the grip of mental confusion and almost insane. He decided, then, together with two priests, to make an exorcism to free her from the daemon.

While they were doing it, a musician, by chance, started to play the cithara in the street. The woman, as soon as she listened to the music, suddenly stood up and went out of the house, as taken by madness. Then she started to dance outside, following the musician.

After a while, she fell down, fainted on the ground, and then she was taken home.

Here, when the musician started again to play the cithara in front of her, she awoke and, although half dead, she stood up with renewed energy and danced for two hours.

She continued to dance in the same way on the following two days.

In the end, she was completely healed. (1865: 111-112)

Bergsøe resumes, by now, the main points of the issue of Tarantism, framing the phenomenon in a wider cultural and historical context of the time in which it originated and developed.

In Apulia, for 4 centuries, a big epidemic happened every year. Its treatment was a copious sweating, provoked by the quick movements of the dance.

If not healed, the illness could attack the nervous system, leading to hysteria and melancholy. The cause was thought to be the bite of the Tarantula, but only of the type that lived in that geographic area.

It was unknown how Tarantism was born. Its origin could be local and casual; it could be a resonance of ancient mystic cults, maybe in connection with the feasts of the gods Cibebe and Baccus, that in Apulia, the old Magna Graecia, had stronger roots than in other places. (1865: 114)

Surely in the 13th century, when probably Tarantism was born, there were many illnesses and natural calamities that hit the region, provoking the disorientation of the people.

The political, economic and social situation was oppressing: the masses were dominated by the aristocracy and by the clergy, subject to earthly and ultramundane menaces; the life was very hard and poor; the hunger, the dirtiness and the illnesses tormented the population, that succumbed to religious and unreligious superstitions.

The plague of the 13th century lashed all Europe, subject also to the repercussions of telluric disruptions in Asia; famines and invasions of locusts beat the Mediterranean coasts.

People reacted blaming themselves, giving rise to the movement of the Flagellants, or blaming their own enemies, starting persecutions against the Jews.

The dance epidemics of St John and St Veit took origin in Europe in this context.

The wandering of St John dancers finished in 1348, while St Veit's dances, that started in 1418, lasted two centuries. In the 17th century there was still some case of mania.

Bergsøe briefly examines the two movements, lightning their mutual differences and finding out some characteristic typical also of Tarantism, like the long period of anxiety, the melancholy, the depression. The bursting of the crisis was healed with the dance provoked by the music.

Both in Tarantism and in the European dance epidemics, moreover, the healing was transitory and the illness came back every year in precise periods and seasons.

Bergsøe is not surprised, then, that many doctors of his time, as J. Hecker, considered Tarantism like the Italian form of St Veit dance. But the Italian phenomenon, according to him, could not be assimilated to the European dances. Tarantism was a product of the local cultural tradition, that had its roots in the culture of Magna Graecia.

Bergsøe remarks that the sources factually never put Tarantism in connection with St Veit dance or with other dances, but only with the poison of the Italian Tarantula spider. (1865: 124-126)

About the word Tarantula, Bergsøe explains that it included, in the old times, many animals. Only in the 18th century it was restrained to indicate the *Lycosa Tarantula*.

But the peasants call Tarantula both the gecko, the scorpion and the *Lycosa*, practically all the spiders.

According to Ferdinando, the town of Taranto could have received its name by the Tarantula and not the contrary. The connotative mark of the town was, in fact, in the common opinion, the Tarantula, and after it changed in dolphin. But in Ferdinando's opinion it was a scorpion.

This evidence seems to point out that Tarantism was generated by the fear of the spider. Such a huge number of spiders explains also why so many people were sick without having contact with the *Lycosa Tarantula*, that, furthermore, is absolutely innocuous. (Bergsøe 1865: 130)

In the old treatises on the spiders there were many superstitions and all the spiders were considered guilty of provoking the symptoms that after became typical of the *Tarantula*. This is testified again by Ferdinando, in relation to the Greek writers. (Bergsøe 1865: 135)

In the Middle Age there was the idea that if a person was bitten by a *Tarantula* with a cold or melancholic nature, he received its disposition to sadness and melancholy.

If the person was bitten during the summer, the poison worked immediately, because it was fluid in the heat.

The hot was also thought to be the cause of the recurrence in summer of the symptoms, because it put again in action the poison that had been quiescent during the winter.

To expell the poison it was necessary to sweat, and this effect was realized by dancing.

Bergsøe underlines that in Apulia, in the ancient times, the music was very often used as a therapy for many diseases; it is not surprising, then, that it was used also for the bite of the dangerous spiders. (1865: 138-140)

From Ferdinando to Valletta nobody had doubted about the poison of the *Tarantula*, but already in the 17th century the doctors were divided into the ones that believed in it and the others that were against it.

It was with Serao, in the 18th century, that the existence of Tarantism went in crisis.

In the 19th century, Bergsøe believes that the *Tarantula* is not so dangerous and that its poison has only transitory effects.

These effects are dependent on different factors: the fantasy of the person who has been bitten, his constitution, the quantity of the poison, the environmental conditions.

The death is rare and it can happen for small animals, not for the persons.

The cases described by De Renzi are therefore, according to Bergsøe, exaggerated in their gravity and show how, in the 19th century, the superstition for the spider was still alive.

(1865: 144-147)

But what is indisputable, remarks Bergsøe, is that the region of Apulia was for a so long time theatre of a melancholic-hystheric syndrome, ascribed to the bite of *Tarantula* and healed with

the dance. An illness that was unknown in the ancient times and that disappeared in the more recent times.

The causes of Tarantism must be found elsewhere, says Bergsøe.

According to him there were two forms of suffering in Tarantism: the first was due to the real spider's or scorpion's poisoning; the second was a chronic form with slight temperature, that started with hypochondria and, through a long melancholic phase, brought to mania and craziness. (1865: 151)

The bite provoked swelling, nausea, vomiting, urogenital problems.

But the hypochondria, the fever, the delirium, the thinness depended on other factors.

These factors, that generated recurrent epidemics, are cited by the same authors that believed in Tarantism.

Baglivi, for example, found difficult to distinguish between Tarantism and high fever.

According to him, if the music didn't produce any effect, the sufferer remained in that condition until a new explosion of the crisis in summer, under the heat of the sun.

If he didn't heal, he went toward the incurability with thinness, asthenia, hypochondria, and he could become mad and suicidal. (Bergsøe 1865: 152)

But the causes of the illness, in this case, were not due to the bite of the Tarantula.

According Bergsøe, another was the cause: the malaria.

Bergsøe is convinced that the region of Apulia was beaten, during the summer, by the malaria and its fevers, exactly as it happened in the fields around Roma. (1865: 152-153)

Because of the superstitious fear of the spider, people ascribed to its bite what in reality had to be ascribed to malaria; the hysteria, that often accompanied the malaria, spread the contagion by sympathy, attracting crowds of simulating people.

This explains why the illness was absent in the ancient times, when Apulia was a fruitful region, before that the plague and the geologic upsettings of the Middle Age changed its nature and made the land receptive for malaria.

About the music as a therapy, Bergsøe underlines again that it was not the cause of the healing, but only a mean that pushed the sufferer to dance and move, so that he could sweat a lot.

Together with the sweating, also the abstention from the food and the assumption of wine helped against the fevers.

But Bergsøe remains skeptical about a complete healing. (1865: 157-158)



The treatise ends with Bergsøe's account of his encounter, in the "campagna romana", with a peasant who got scared by hearing about Bergsøe's scientific interest in the Tarantulas. Later the peasant became his friend and he explained to him that there were three types of Tarantula: the spinster, that produced, as effect, a good mood, the wish of singing and of doing foolish things; the widow, that was the most dangerous, because it produced hypochondria, melancholy and the wish of death; the married, that made people thoughtful and wacky. (1865: 160-161)

I think that in Bergsøe's rationalistic perspective, in the wake of the Enlightenment Napolitan tradition, there is some interpretative originality, like the important role that he ascribes to the precise diagnosis of the many types of fever that flew indiscriminately into the syndrome, identifying in unacknowledged forms of malaria a possible confusing factor.

Furthermore, his perspective, aimed to explain rationally what it had been object of superstition and ignorance for a so long time, is specular in a way to the one of De Martino in relation with the end of Tarantism.

De Martino, in fact, as we will see, remarks that the Enlightenment of the Napolitan medical school deprived the phenomenon of Tarantism of its cultural circulation and common sharing, confining it to survive in the poorest social classes.

If Bergsøe was surely the main source of Ibsen with regard to Tarantism, it is important to remark that this phenomenon represented until the end of the 18th century a significant issue of dissertations and disputes in the European accademic world, also among the Scandinavian scholars, mainly H. Vallerius, E. Swedenborg, M. Kähler. (in *La tarantola iperborea. Scrittori del Settecento svedese sul tarantismo* 1999)

These scholars don't testify only the importance of the issue but they permit also to understand how the attitude towards Tarantism changed in the time, starting from the sharing of the idea that the spider's bite produced the syndrome, as it was for Vallerius and Swedenborg, up to the destruction of the myth, dued to Kähler, that gives an explanation that is very near to the one of Serao.

Harald Vallerius, mainly interested in philosophy and music, wrote in 1702 a treatise on Tarantism in occasion of his son's graduation as Magister Philosophiae in Uppsala<sup>14</sup>. The treatise was essentially a diligent and exhaustive collection of the most fashionable theories of the scholars of the time, as Ferdinando, Kircher, Baglivi, Sengverds, divided in three sections: historicum, physicum and musicum. They are a summary of the medical and philosophical literature on Tarantism.

There is a singular theory of the human races, divided in four descendances, while in the third chapter, besides a certain attention to the tradition of the folk music in the North, from Latvia to Poland, Sweden and the Baltic area, there is an interesting analogy with the Mediterranean traditions, that fifty years later will have a better result with Kähler.

It is surprisingly modern the theory of the rhythm and the diminutions as an influencing factor of the states of consciousness. The theory is in relation with the passions and it is based on the opposition and integration of different rhythms, suggesting that in the dialectics of ternary and binary beats there is the root of any behavioural modification induced by the music. (Vallerius in *La tarantola iperborea*. 1999: 67)

Emanuel Swedenborg, thanks to his discoveries in the field of the cerebral physiology, in relation with the individuation of the emotional and cognitive seats of the human intellect, obtained appreciations and fame by the Royal Crown of Sweden.

When in 1738 he came through the Alps for his grand tour, he was still a man of Enlightenment, far from the mystic conception of his later theosophical conversion.

In his *Anatomica and Phisiologica* from 1740 there is a short essay on the Tarantula, a sort of collection of notes on the illness due to its bite, usefull for the naturalistic investigations.

Swedenborg seems to accept the theory of a symmetry between the effect of sound and rhythm on the Tarantula and the efficacy of the therapy applied with the same rhythm and sound on the "tarantati". (Swedenborg in *La tarantola iperborea*. 1999: 81)

Swedenborg's treatise is not so original but it is emblematic of an attitude, the same of Vallerius, that Kähler will definitively destroy with his experimental principles.

Mårten Kähler made an expedition in the Mediterranean Countries in 1753, with the aim to conduct a botanic investigation in the South of Europe on behalf of Linneus.

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<sup>14</sup> The treatise was attributed, according to a habit of the epoch, to the son, but there are no doubts that it was written by the father.

In the summer of 1754 he was in Naples, where he came in contact with the accademic circles of the town and probably also with Serao.

Then he was for two years in Taranto, where he observed the phenomenon of Tarantism following a rigorous experimental method.

In his "Anmärkningur vid Dans-sjukan eller den så kallade Tarantismus" from 1758 he took note of the habits of fishermen and urbanized peasants in the town of Taranto, of their diet, their dress, the lack of hygiene and the musical traditions.

Having written down one of the musical tune utilized for the treatment, he called two musicians for the execution and, in this circumstance, a young female servant, that in everybody's opinion was not sick, began to dance, continuing for about one hour.

He didn't realize that he was in front of the phenomenon of Tarantism, but not in accordance with a "medical" view. The dance of the girl was in fact aroused not by a bite of Tarantula but by a musical tune.

Kähler used the Swedish composed word "dans-sjukan", that means "dance illness", and he formulated a theory that derived from the observation of the life conditions of the sick people, in full armony with the Enlightenment Napolitan point of view.

According to him, Taranto was a very dirty town, the inhabitants were affected by illnesses caused by the parasites; people ate mainly vegetables, legumes, seafood and fish.

The division of the work was rigid, with the men occupied in the fields or at sea and the women closed in the house.

Even so, Tarantism affected quite exclusively the women. Strangers, children and the old people were free from the illness.

Tarantism was commonly ascribed to the bite of the Tarantula, but nobody had directly assisted to this circumstance.

The Tarantulas lived in the fields and, notwithstanding they were present also in Latium, Tuscany and Lombardy, in these regions they didn't induce people to dance with their bite. Kähler marked, moreover, that all the spiders were indiscriminately defined Tarantulas, but nobody knew exactly which variety provoked the illness. The dance of the Tarantula happened especially in the months of June and July, when the illness sharpened. But nobody died of Tarantism.

According to Kähler, then, the sickness was not provoked by the spider but by poor living conditions. The problem was a humor imbalance, with a prevalence of the atrabilious one,

that produced a sort of peculiar melancholic syndrome, characterized by the necessity to dance. (Kähler in *La tarantola iperborea*. 1999: 95)

Kähler couldn't explain why it happened, doubting that it was due to the excess of oysters in the diet, while he thought that the heat of the summer was the real cause for the annual recurrence of the sickness.

In his opinion, the majority of the authors that described Tarantism as a terrible illness based their knowledge on stories and only sometimes on specific cases. Instead, the syndrome could generally be reduced to a paroxysm of melancholy, provoked by the hypochondria in the organism.

He explained that the eventual death was due to a fever that afterwards overlapped the syndrome, that remained of melancholic type. Also in the Scandinavian Countries it was possible to observe similar pathological conditions, that had nothing to do with the spiders. They produced odd behaviours that were all solved with sleep and sweat.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE ITALIAN FOLK DANCE

### TARANTELLA

Tarantella is the most famous folk dance in the traditional Italian landscape.

It refers factually to many different forms of dance and this is the reason of a quite complex and subtle account of the issues.

I will try to analyze it first from an etymological point of view and then in a more proper musical and dance perspective.

Carmelina Naselli (2004), in “L’etimologia di Tarantella” reconstructs with precision the etymon of the word *Tarantella*, giving us also some interesting remarks on the dance and its supposed origins.

The scholar believes that the linguistic aspect is deeply connected with the musicological one. “The two criteria, the formal and the historical-philological, as they are defined by the latest linguistic theories, shall go hand in hand.”<sup>15</sup> (Naselli 2004: 117)

According to her, prior to the term *Tarantella* there probably was the term *Tarantula* and both the words derive from the term *Taranta*, originated “in the time of the Roman Empire and not after” (2004: 123)

In the Latin language, in fact, the suffix *-ulus-ula-ulum*, from where the word *Tarantula* comes out, is older and less popular than the suffix *-ellus-ella-ellum*, from where the word *Tarantella* derives.

The term *Tarantula* is spread in the linguistic geographical areas of Latin derivation.

The term *Tarantella*, more recent and popular, at the beginning meant the spider defined by the scientists as *Lycosa Tarantula*.

As time went by, its meaning spread to the music and to the dance that were used in the treatment of the presumed effects of the bite of this spider.

From the second half of the 16th century, other forms of music began to be used for the treatment of Tarantism and, among them, a tune with a rising rhythm up to a big quickness seemed to be very effective.

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<sup>15</sup> Naselli’s original: “I due criteri, chiamati, dalle teorie linguistiche più recenti, l’uno formale, l’altro storico-filologico, debbono procedere di pari passo”

This tune was called *Tarantella*, maybe because its liveliness reminded of the same quick movements of the *Tarantula*.

From the music the name moved to the dance.

There are not many evidences about the time when the word started to indicate not anymore the spider but the music and the dance related to it.

In any case Naselli doesn't think that

*././* it is possibile to go back beyond the 16th century. Otherwise, how could be possibile to explain the case of Perotto and D'Alessandro, authors of the 15th century, writers of treatises about Tarantula and Tarantism, that use the word Tarantula for "spider", noticing its popular origin, but that never use the word Tarantella when they speak about the musical therapy, recurring instead to other words?<sup>16</sup> (2004: 122)

The scholar indicates that *Tarantula* and *Tarantella* are a diminutive of *Taranta*, word that we find for the first time when Goffredo Malaterra, in his *Historia Sicula*, speaks about the sufferings borne in 1064 by Robert I Guiscard and his troops nearby a mountain of Palermo, after called *Tarantinus*, exactly because infested by the Tarantulas.

The town of Taranto, in Apulia, was called *Tarentum* in Latin and, according to Naselli, the word *Taranta* derives from the ancient Greek name of this town, corresponding in its accusative form to *Tàranta*.

The fact that the name is moved from a town to a spider is explained by Naselli on the base of the unpredictability of the linguistic dynamics that produce such phenomena.

If today, for instance, we call a wine Champagne, than we can also assume that a spider owes a town its name.

We know that many authors have spoken about the huge diffusion of dangerous insects like Tarantulas and scorpions in the fields around the town of Taranto in the ancient times.

It seems, anyway, on the base of an evidence that goes back to I. Carrieri, reported by I.

Longiave (in Naselli 2004: 127), that the appearance of the word *Tarantula* in Apulia can be dated to the age of the emperor Augustus.

According to Carrieri, in fact, an ancient population of the Center and the South of Italy, the so-called "Marsi", imported the Tarantulas in the South of Italy at the age of Augustus.

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<sup>16</sup> Naselli's original: "*././* si possa risalire oltre il secolo XVI. E, se fosse altrimenti, come spiegare il caso del Perotto e D'Alessandro, autori del sec. XV, trattatisti della tarantula e del tarantismo, i quali, mentre usano tarantula per "ragno" e ne fanno notare l'origine popolare, quando parlano della terapia musicale, non usano mai tarantella e ricorrono ad altri termini?"

With regard to the dance of Tarantella, Naselli rejects the hypothesis of its origin in the town of Taranto: in Apulia the dance that was used for the treatment of Tarantism was the Pizzica or Pizzica Pizzica, still today known and practiced.

This is a solo-dance with a magical character, substantially different from the couple-dance of Tarantella, that presents many forms in the various regions of Southern Italy. (Naselli 2004: 124)

The word *Pizzica* derives from the verb *pizzicare* (to sting), that indicates the action of biting. It refers to the Tarantula, through its most feared quality: the biting, the stinging.

If the etymology of the word *Tarantella* refers to the name of the spider, (*Tarantella* is the name of the dance, *Tarantula* is the name of the spider, *Taranto* is the name of the town), the name of the Apulian dance Pizzica (that is different from Tarantella) refers to the most peculiar action – the biting and stinging - of the mythical animal.

But nothing of that helps us to know the origin of the music and dance of our interest.

In a musical and dance perspective, the name *Tarantella* indicates, according to all the scholars, among whom Pietro Mormino and Piero Di Liberto (1955), Roberto De Simone (1979), Costa Armida and Costa Barbara (1999), a traditional dance usually danced in couple, not necessarily man-woman, structured in two main figures: one frontal and another as a wide slow circle, that can also be only hinted.

Sometimes it can be added a third figure, a quick circle or halfcircle.

There are also forms of four persons, in circle, processional, and less frequent but very peculiar forms with only a male or female dancer.

The musical rhythm is lively and engaging, often increasing, based on different times (2/4, 6/8, 4/4, 12/8).

With regard to the music and dance of Tarantella, Pierpaolo De Giorgi (2004), in *L'estetica della tarantella*, remarks the presence of a “varied repetition of analogous tunes”<sup>17</sup>, that symbolizes a sort of a musical “everlasting recurrence”<sup>18</sup>. It is the same mechanism of the collective memory, that reproduces with a certain precision but that enriches and re-creates the memory itself.

“The cyclic music of Tarantella, basically perpetual, is an application of the mythical thought”<sup>19</sup> (De Giorgi 2004: 219)

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<sup>17</sup> De Giorgi's original: “variata ripetizione di melodie analoghe”

<sup>18</sup> De Giorgi's original: “eterno ritorno”

<sup>19</sup> De Giorgi's original: “La musica ciclica, tendenzialmente perpetua, della tarantella è un'applicazione del pensiero mitico”

The instruments that are used in the accompaniment of the melodies can be very different: drum, bagpipe, accordion, guitar, violin, mandolin, flute, clarino, trumpet of the gypsies, castanets, showily and rhythmically shaken.

Giorgio Di Lecce (2001) reports that the name *Tarantella*, with regard to the music, appears for the first time in a music sheet of Foriano Pico, in 1608. We know very little about this musician, just that he was active at the end of the 16th century in the towns of Florence and Naples.

But the first literary source that speaks about Tarantella goes back to A. Kircher, the famous scholar of Natural Science and Music of the 17th century, interested in the illnesses that were treated with music and dance. He collected all the materials that had been produced until his times on Tarantella.

To have clear quotations of the dance that is recognized with the name of *Tarantella* and that is similar to the current forms in which it is performed still today, we shall move forward to the 18th century, when Tarantella assumed a social and versatile value, especially as a courtship dance, and it was revised, afterwards, in the artistic and stylized forms by famous writers, painters and musicians.

Lady Hamilton, wife of the English ambassador at the court of Ferdinand IV Bourbon, was famous for her Tarantella. During the feasts that she organized in her wonderful villa in Naples, she bewitched the spectators with her elegant and graceful movements. Her performances became a paradigm of stylistic perfection.

From then on Tarantella was ennobled by many musicians, like Liszt, Chopin, Mendelsshon, Rossini, Verdi, Casella, that were inspired by its liveliness in the composition of their music. The dance offered a creative impulse also to writers, as Goethe, Didier, Rilke, and to painters, as De Bourcard, Fabris, Perrault, Dalbono, Sargent and many others.

To the foreigners eyes, Tarantella appeared as a summary of the Mediterranean spirit, in its colours, movements, music.

Italy, France, Spain, Corsica and Elba islands were, in fact, the places where the dance developed during the centuries.

In Italy, the word *Tarantella* includes generally the whole “jumped”, “untied”, “old” dances, conflated in one and only sort.



In the South of Italy the word *Tarantella* indicates a very peculiar and famous form of dance, that is considered the symbol of this area.

But the several traditions of the South are quite different from each other, and, as Giuseppe Michele Gala (1999) explains in his book *La tarantella dei pastori*, where he reports the characteristics of the dance in the various districts of Southern Italy, it is possible to speak of a Tarantella that is typical of Campania, of another that is typical of Apulia, another of Sicilia, Calabria, Basilicata.

The name itself can be replaced or put together with other names, that sometimes indicate the same dance, other times indicate dances that are like Tarantella.

The etymology of the names of the dances, anyway, according to De Simone and to Gala, goes always back to the economic and social context of which they are expression.

The *Pastorale* (rural), for instance, a typical dance of Basilicata and Calabria, especially in the mountain districts, is linked with the rural environment.

The *Villanella* or *Viddhaneddha* (peasant girl), spread in the central and South Calabria, is a variation of the typical Tarantella. This dance is practised still today, but it doesn't seem to be in connection with the old one from the 16th century, often mentioned in Naples and in the Southern Reign.

The *Zomparello*, or *Zumaprieddu* (little bound), is spread in Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicilia. It corresponds to the *Saltarello* of the central Italy and it presents similarities with the *Pastorale* of Basilicata and Calabria.

Its name seems to hint to a more proper and orderly dance, unknown in our times, based on small continuous turns and on hands' and feet's beats.

The *Tarascone*, or *Tarascuni*, spread in Basilicata and Sicilia, is a variation of the dance *Trescone*, typical of the central Italy, with clear sexual allusions. Its etymon probably derives from the medieval Germanic voice *Thriskan*, that means to beat, to thresh, with reference to the farmers work, when they thresh the corn with the feet to separate the grains from the straw and the bran.

In the 14th century the *Tresca* was a dance spread both in Florence and in Naples.

In German, in French-Occitanian, in Catalan and Castilian language, the name *Trescone* indicates a dance still today.

The *Pizzica*, or *Pizzica Pizzica*, *Pizzica “tarantata”*, *Pizzica scherma*, *Pizzicarella*, spread in Salento, the Southern area of Apulia, and in the countryside of Bari, Taranto, Matera, Potenza, derives its name from the verb “to sting”, “to bite”, as we have already seen. It refers to the mythical meaning of the dance, both as consequence and as treatment of the illness caused by the bite of the Tarantula.

The *Ballo sul tamburo*, or *Balle ‘ncoppe o Tammurre* (dance on the drum), danced in couple, is spread in the Napolitan area, where still today is often practiced.

The name derives from its main instrument, the drum with frame, that dictates the dance’s time, mostly binary.

Today it is usually called *Tammurriata*, a word that indicates a pressing sequence of drum’s beats and, for extension, the dance itself.

In the wide family of Tarantellas, besides the Apulian *Pizzica*, that is linked with the therapeutic treatment of Tarantism, the dance that is nearer to Tarantella is the Napolitan *Tammurriata*.

Perrelli (2002), referring to Bergsøe’s book (1907), where the Danish author writes that Ibsen, in the October 1867, saw in Pompei a Tarantella that was “danced by the daughters of the owners of the hotel *Il sole*”, remarks that this was probably a “typical Tammurriata organized for the travellers of the Italian grand tour.” (Perrelli 2002: 120)

The famous Napolitan ethnomusicologist Roberto De Simone (1979), in his book *Canti e tradizioni popolari in Campania*, says that “/.../as a couple dance, Tarantella has been typical of the town of Naples, where in the past it had the function that today «Tammurriata» has in its district.”<sup>20</sup> [my translation] (1979: 28)

The names *Tammurriata* and *Tarantella* don’t refer to only one dance, as it is often believed, but to two different dances, the both performed in Naples and in the Napolitan area. (De Simone 1979: 28)

They have different representative functions, that are distinguished also in the popular world.

The first basic difference between *Tammurriata* and *Tarantella* is the rhythm.

While *Tammurriata* has a mostly binary rhythm, *Tarantella*, in addition to be more lively, presents rhythmic figures that can be constantly ternary or alternately binary and ternary.

The rhythm of *Tarantella* is beaten by the drum, and the traditional instrumental melodies are tuned on this basis.

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<sup>20</sup> De Simone’s original: “/.../come danza di coppia, la tarantella è stata tipica della città di Napoli, dove per il passato essa aveva la funzione che oggi ha in Provincia la «tammurriata»”

The songs, moreover, are made of hendecasyllabic couplets, that have different accents from the ones of Tammurriata.

About the dance, Tammurriata is articulated between two persons in couple (man-man, man-woman, woman-woman) or between more couples of persons, with a figurative scheme that is independent among the various couples.

As a couple-dance, Tarantella has not a so important representative function and, in this form, is performed in many places around Salerno, Avellino, Caserta and Benevento.

But the “real” Tarantella is danced by only one person and it seems to have first of all a mythical and symbolic value.

It is in fact connected with the representation of specific dancing characters, like the “old Carnival woman”, the Napolitan “pazzariello” (crackpot) or the person that is affected by Tarantism. (De Simone 1979: 26)

The “old Carnival woman” is a typical character of the popular feasts’ processions, like the Carnival of Monte Marano, near Avellino. She is a representation of death.

The music has a rhythm that is beaten by a drum with sticks and other percussions, while a melody is tuned on a shawm.

The dance is choral, where the gestural expressiveness “lets us suppose a far origin of Tarantella as an ancient dance of death and war”<sup>21</sup>. [my translation] (De Simone 1979: 30)

The same rhythm of Tarantella marks also the steps of the Napolitan “pazzariello”.

He is dressed with a uniform, a bicorn and military decorations. He is a foolish and, in the processions of Carnival, he precedes the “old woman”. Again, war and death.

The last model of Tarantella with a mythical meaning can be found in Cilento, Campania’s southern offshoot and land of Tarantism too.

The rhythm is beaten by the drumming and by the beating guitars. The dance, performed by a single dancer, is very quick and very similar to the therapeutic dances used in Apulia for the musical exorcism of the Tarantula.

The dances of the “real” Tarantella, then, according to De Simone, have first of all a symbolic and representative function in a complex system of meanings and allusions: the old Carnival woman, the Napolitan crackpot, the possession of the people affected by Tarantism, the procession in connection with the Carnival and its symbols.

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<sup>21</sup> De Simone’s original: “ci fa supporre una lontana origine della Tarantella come un’antica danza di morte e di guerra”.

Besides the allusion to war and death, there is also a well-wishing allusion, like in the Ballintrezzo (braided dance) of Carnival: many coloured ribbons are fasten on the top of a long pole in the middle of the square. These ribbons intertwine during the dance of the dancers' couples, in which the feminine role is performed by men dressed up as women.

This short analysis of Tarantella wants to show how deceptive and restrictive is to consider this dance as an elegant, erotic and courtship representation, performed in couple.

This is a commonplace, that derives from a turistic interpretation:

*.../the couple dance shall absolutely not be connected to the oleographic love dance between a man and a woman. These dances concern the worst folk tradition and don't express at all the cultural meaning of the traditional dance.*<sup>22</sup> [my translation] (De Simone 1979: 32)

It doesn't mean, of course, that the erotism is absent, but it must be seen in a wider anthropological perspective without the sweetened and neutralized characteristics that appear, on the contrary, in the picturesque and conventional portrayals of the dance.

The "real" Tarantella, in short, expresses a ritual representation of everything that "represses and doesn't permit", in contrast with what we wish but we cannot have. (De Simone 1979: 32)

According to the scholar, it is important to remark that the couple can often be composed by two men or two women or by an old woman and a young man.

Moreover, when the dance refers to the love between a man and a woman, there is a very sensual, violent and ambiguous gestural expressiveness, always referring to the life's frustrations.

I want to underline, nevertheless, that also the oleographic version of the dance, rightly stigmatized by De Simone as not genuine, presents clues of such conflicts.

Generally the figures of the dance represent a love story that is first declared and shared by the couple and then refused by the woman. It follows the indignation of the man, the contrition of the woman and the final reconciliation.

It means that also in the sweetened conventional version of this dance it is possible to find feelings like happiness, offence, struggle, defeat, submission, rebellion, frustration, rebirth and reconciliation.

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<sup>22</sup> De Simone's original: *".../la danza a coppie non deve assolutamente associarsi all'oleografica danza d'amore tra un uomo e una donna. Tali danze riguardano il folklorismo deteriore e non esprimono affatto il senso culturale del ballo tradizionale"*

According to some evidences, De Simone believes that in Naples the dance of Tarantella was, in the past, an authentic ritual with collective components.

About the origins of Tarantella, De Giorgi (2004) doesn't agree with De Simone.

He says: "some Napolitan scholars, like Roberto De Simone, seem to accept with a certain difficulty that it [Tarantella] doesn't genetically come from Campania."<sup>23</sup> [my translation] (De Giorgi 2004: 212)

The Napolitan musician Eugenio Bennato (2001) remarks that there is ".../this big national equivocal that is the Napolitan Tarantella/.../ Tarantella is not from Naples."<sup>24</sup> [my translation] (Bennato, "Le leggi musicali della tarantella" in *Tarantismo e Neotarantismo* 2001: 87)

De Simone, anyway, gives us very useful indications on this point, when he speaks about Tarantella of St John's night performed in Naples during the 16th century.

In the night of the 23th of June, along Chiaia's beach, nearby the church of St John on the sea, women and men bathed undressed in the sea and danced until the dawn.

These rituals, that go back to undefined times, were already forbidden in the age of the Spanish viceroys, but they survived in secret forms. (De Simone 1979: 33)

Another interesting evidence about the unknown characteristics of the Napolitan Tarantella is given by the doctor and anthropologist A. De Blasio (in De Simone 1979: 31), who made important studies on the criminal population of Naples between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

According to De Blasio, a particular type of Tarantella was secretly danced in the Napolitan district of *Imbrecciata*, where people with interests in strong emotions were admitted under payment to watch the performance.

This Tarantella could be simple or complicated.

The simple Tarantella was performed in big rooms where naked women

.../indulged themselves, shouting, beating each other, tearing out their hair, rolling on the ground among the curses and the tavern-chorus. They danced, jumped: the somersaults, the noise/.../and the horrific Saturnalia in the end forced to run away with horror...<sup>25</sup> [my translation] (De Blasio, in De Simone 1979: 32)

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<sup>23</sup> De Giorgi's original: "alcuni studiosi napoletani, come Roberto De Simone, sembrano accettare con una certa difficoltà che essa non provenga geneticamente dalla Campania"

<sup>24</sup> Bennato's original: ".../questo grande equivoco nazionale che è la tarantella napoletana/.../la tarantella non è napoletana"

<sup>25</sup> De Blasio's original: ".../si abbandonavano, urlando, picchiandosi, strappandosi i capelli, rotolandosi per terra tra le bestemmie e i ritornelli da taverna. Ballavano, saltavano: le capriole, il chiasso/.../e il Saturnale orrendo alla fine faceva scappare inorriditi..."

In the complicated Tarantella the dance of the women was enriched by the participation of the men.

At the beginning two female naked dancers moved furiously miming intimacies; then two naked men arrived in the room and “they rushed upon the two wraiths and dragged them behind the curtain. What happened then, I cannot describe...”<sup>26</sup> [my translation] (De Blasio, in De Simone 1979: 32)

From these evidences it comes out the character of violent possession of the simple Tarantella and the ardently erotic character of the complicated Tarantella.

According to De Simone, such dances are testified also in more recent times.

Secret Tarantellas, in fact, were danced in the suburbs of Naples after the bombings of 1944, in half-destroyed and squalid places, where women and men danced naked in front of the American soldiers. (1979: 35)

These ancient dances, in conclusion, repressed and forbidden during the centuries, decayed from their cultural and collective value to low and coarse forms of sexual expression, still surviving in the 20th century, in the most marginalized, poor and rough districts of the town.

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<sup>26</sup> De Blasio's original: “si avventarono su quelle due larve e se le trascinarono dietro “o sipario”. Ciò che successe non posso descrivere...”

**CHAPTER 4**  
**THE PHENOMENON OF TARANTISM.**  
**DE MARTINO'S WORKS**  
**AND THE OTHER STUDIES**

Tarantism is a historical and religious phenomenon that took origin in the Middle Age and lasted until the 18th century and longer. It is a minor religious formation, mostly peasant, characterized by the symbolism of the Tarantula that bites and poisons, and by the treatment of music, dance and colours, that free from the poisoned bite.

The deepest and widest investigation on Tarantism until today has been made by Ernesto De Martino (1961), one of the most important anthropologists in Italy, not alive today, who has based his study on one side on the literary sources from the past and on the other side on the direct research on the territory, carried out by an equipe of different professional figures: two anthropologists, a musicologist, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, an expert of latrodectism and a social assistant.

The results of the investigation have been published in the famous book *La terra del rimorso* (The land of the remorse) to which I will constantly refer in this chapter.

De Martino has analyzed the phenomenon in a historical and cultural perspective, against the medical interpretation, that considered Tarantism a consequence of the poisoned bite of the spider or a psychic disorder.

On the contrary, he thinks that the phenomenon shall be understood as an expression of the conflict between Christianity and heathenism, in the frame of the social, religious and cultural life of the South of Italy. (De Martino 2002: 32)

De Martino's investigation started in Galatina, a small town in the center of Salento (the Southern area of Apulia), on the 29th of June 1959, in the occasion of the feast of St Peter and St Paul, when the "tarantati", (the people that are bitten by the spider Tarantula<sup>27</sup>) arrived from all the villages of Apulia to the chapel of St Paul in Galatina.

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<sup>27</sup> The scientific name of this spider is "Lycosa Tarantula", as De Martino indicates in his book, but in the colloquial jargon it is used both "Tarantula" and "Tarantola" or "Tarantula".

Some of them wanted to thank the Saint for the healing from the illness, other came to strengthen the recovery or to implore the Saint for it, if the domiciliary treatment had not been executed or it had been ineffective. (De Martino 2002: 43)

Of the 21 cases of “tarantati” that were examined by the equipe, only one was surely connected with the bite of the Tarantula.

The psychiatrist recognised that the illness manifested itself in a manifold way, that he could not frame in any nosological category.

It was noticed that there was no sufferers from Galatina and its surroundings. People asserted, in fact, that the inhabitants of the town were immune to Tarantism, thanks to the protection of St Paul.

This was the first sign of a cultural influence of the phenomenon.

Not all the sufferers that came to the chapel had received the treatment at home.

Because of the disruption of the phenomenon, some of them, in fact, came directly to visit the Saint, without any previous treatment.

The crisis expressed itself mostly in the period immediately before the feast of St Peter and St Paul, like if the Christian cultural influence had bent the pagan phenomenon to its religious calendar.

Many of the “tarantati” had already had other crisis in the previous years, always in the same period. After the first bite, healed at home with a treatment based on music, dance and colours, it followed a series of years with new crisis, and every time the same treatment was necessary.

This was another cultural sign of the phenomenon.

Moreover, the fact that there was a prevalence of the female participation to Tarantism referred again to the same cultural perspective.

On this point De Martino (2002: 78) reports the results of the study that S. Bettini has made on the diffusion of latrodectism in Italy between the years 1949-1951.

The latrodectism is a toxic syndrome that follows the bite of a spider defined as *Latrodectus Tredecimguttatus*. Its symptoms are a psychomotor agitation with offuscation of the senses, a violent headache, pain in all the body, retention of urine, conjunctival hyperaemia.

From the analysis of Bettini it emerges that, on 231 cases, 181 were men and 50 were women.

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With regard to the etymology of the word “Tarantula”, “tarantula” and the later “tarantella”, it is only possible to remark their connection with “Taranto”, an important town of Apulia, the area in which the phenomenon of Tarantism originated and developed.



This was by him connected with the fact that in the rural works there were utilized mainly men, who could be easily bitten by the spider.

On the contrary, the wider diffusion of Tarantism between the women was a contradiction.

Tarantism showed a peculiar distribution also in relation to the family. It was frequent that a “tarantato” came from a family with inside already one or more “tarantati”.

Yet another important indication of the cultural nature of the phenomenon was given by the fact that the first bite occurred almost always in a period of the life “between the beginning of the puberty and the end of the age of development”<sup>28</sup>. [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 50)

All these circumstances: the local immunity, the seasonal and yearly recurrence, the female prevalence, the familiar distribution and the age of puberty at the “first bite” gave evidence in favour of a symbolic interpretation of Tarantism.

The bite, the poison, the crisis, the treatment and the healing, then, were ritual and mythical symbols.

Also if only for one “tarantato” it had been possible to go back to the real bite of the spider, De Martino didn’t exclude that also for the other “tarantati” the first manifestation of the illness (the first bite) was in connection with a real case of latrodectism.

The crisis of the “tarantato”, moreover, followed more or less the clinic manifestations of the real latrodectism: fall on the ground, tiredness, anguish, psychomotor anxiety, obfuscation of the senses, difficulty in standing, stomachache, nausea, vomiting, paraesthesia, muscular pains, incrementation of the libido.

Tarantism, therefore, also if not reducible to the poisoning due to the *Latrodectus*’ bite, it was not independent from it.

The symbolism of the Tarantula had become autonomous, in the course of a certain cultural and religious history, from the real episodes of latrodectism, that were quite frequent during the summer work in the fields.<sup>29</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 53)

This means that the crisis caused by the real latrodectism could be the occasion to drain off “symbolic poisonings”, like traumas and frustrations, connected with the life of the single individuals.

On the other side, the model of the poisoning could also be used and elaborated again in a symbolic way, during the critical moments of the existence (like the harvest’s difficulty, a

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<sup>28</sup> De Martino’s original: “tra gli inizi della pubertà e il termine dell’età evolutiva”

<sup>29</sup> De Martino’s original: “Il simbolismo della Tarantula si era cioè reso autonomo, nel corso di una certa storia culturale e religiosa, dai reali episodi di latrodectismo relativamente frequenti durante i lavori agricoli estivi”

mourning, an unhappy love, the indigence, the hunger), as a Tarantula's bite that produced a crisis to be healed with music, dance and colours. In this case the first bite was merely symbolic and, in fact, also the description given by the "tarantati" was different.

The first manifestation of the illness (the first bite) was not in connection with the rural works, but with specific situations, like, for instance, the death of the father or a particularly intense prayer.

On the base of the investigation, then, there were two possible causes in the manifestation of Tarantism, according to De Martino and his equipe: a cultural mould of a real episode of latrodectism or a mere symbolic bite.

The psychopathological interpretation of the phenomenon, supported in the same years by scholars like W. Katner (in De Martino 2002: 55) , who advanced the hypothesis of a sunstroke as the cause of the illness, and E. Giordano (in De Martino 2002: 57), who defined Tarantism as a collective psychosis, was definitively put aside.

In a cultural perspective Tarantism was not considered a psychic disorder, but a "symbolic order culturally conditioned", inside which a neurotic crisis, culturally conditioned too, found its solution. (De Martino 2002: 57)

Through the ritual order of the music, dance and colours, the individual crisis, moulded on the behaviour of the poisoned person, was solved. The neurotic crisis could be in connection with real episodes of latrodectism or other illnesses, but the symbol was autonomous and it let the psychic conflict, latent in the unconscious, flow out.

It was like if the repressed sufference searched for an occasion to express itself through circumstances linked with the bite.

Once that the behaviour of the "poisoned" was produced, there was the possibility to seek the help of the exorcism, an instrument of evocation and outflow that didn't function always.

But ".../the device in itself was not «an illness», it was on the contrary an instrument of reintegration/..."<sup>30</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 57), an instrument that, through an order of traditionally effective symbols, strove to bring again a balance.

During the investigation, only one "tarantato" presented clear signs of a psychic pathology, but the phenomenon, in general, appeared to De Martino's equipe as if disrupted and on the way to become a psychic disorder.

Under the pression of the catholic church, that tried to influence and stifle Tararantism, the order of its symbols didn't function anymore.

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<sup>30</sup> De Martino's original: ".../il dispositivo come tale non era una «malattia», ma uno strumento di reintegrazione/..."

In other words, the “tarantati” in the chapel of Galatina on the 29th of June, deprived of their cultural and symbolic horizon of reference (that continued to function in some way at home with the therapy of music, dance and colours), reproduced a behaviour that, exactly because out of context, was becoming psychopathologic.

From the zoological point of view, it was observed that the Tarantula was generally identified with the *Lycosa Tarantula*, a conspicuous but not dangerous spider, that produces only a medium local reaction in the person that is bitten.

The *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, instead, is a spider of limited dimension. It produces a small local reaction but a glaring general symptomatology.

Also the scorpion, dangerous but not mortal, and the *epeira*, an innocuous spider, take part in the construction of the mythological Tarantula.

The “tarantati” mould their crisis on the toxic state produced by the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, but they attribute the cause to an animal that is the synthesis, with a symbolic function, of more animals.

It is in this symbolic function that the Tarantula has different dimensions, it prefers some colours, it dances on specific melodies, it has different moods, presenting itself as a “dancer” or a “singer”, or, on the contrary, as a sad and mute Tarantula, preferring melancholic music instead a lively one. There are also “stormy” Tarantulas, that induce to “make extermination”, or “libertine” Tarantulas, and “sleeping” Tarantulas, that resist to every musical therapy. (De Martino 2002: 62)

From a ritual point of view, the treatment of Tarantism presents very peculiar symbolic features.

To be cured, in fact, the “tarantato” shall identify himself with the spider and he shall dance uninterruptedly the dance of the spider, until the spider itself doesn’t die.

The “tarantato” dances, then, both as a victim and as an antagonist of the spider.

During the dance he speaks with the Tarantula, against the animal or sustaining its power.

For example, he comes to an agreement with the spider on the duration of the dance, in order to obtain the liberation or to agree upon the time of the next crisis. (De Martino 2002: 62)

The Tarantula, then, is a symbol of what is unknown and without a name, but forcefully present inside the unconscious. The zoomorphic symbol gives the possibility to express these repressed inner feelings, letting them be visible in a context of social sharing.

The seasonal repetition of the crisis is itself a way to give order to the repressed feelings, that, without such a regulation, could come out in an anarchic and destabilizing way, “/.../assuming all the antisocial characters of the individual crisis without horizon.”<sup>31</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 63)

An important feature of the rite of the exorcism is the musical exploration of the “tarantato”. The musicians played in front of the “tarantato”, who stayed motionless on the ground, different musical tunes, to find out which one was preferred by the Tarantula that had bitten him and had taken possess, so to say, of his body. At the same time, they had to find out also which tune was the most suitable for the character of the “tarantato”.

In other words, they had to find out the “right” music, that is a music that was able to stimulate the “tarantato” from his state of inertia to the healing dance.

“To stimulate” is my translation of the Italian verb “scazzicare”, that is a specific dialectal term used to indicate the psychomotor agitation of the “tarantato”, stimulated with music and colours.

The rite could be carried out either at home or in the open air. There were always present colourful bands or ribbons, a water vessel and wine leaves or leafy branches<sup>32</sup>.

A fundamental symbol was the swing. Francesco De Raho (1908), a doctor who studied the phenomenon of Tarantism between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in his book *Il tarantolismo nella superstizione e nella scienza*, remarks the habit of the female sufferers to use a rope with two ends: the “tarantata” hung on it, describing a circle during her dance, or held it when she was exhausted.

The rope served also to describe, with the projection of its radius on the ground, the ceremonial boundary of the rite and it was a symbol of the spider’s spinning. (De Raho 1908: 14)

The music was very important in the treatment.

First the “tarantati” were prostrated on the ground; then, when the musicians started to play the “right” music, they began to move the fingers, then the articulations, at the end the all body.

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<sup>31</sup> De Martino’s original: “assumendo tutti i caratteri antisociali della crisi individuale senza orizzonte”.

<sup>32</sup> De Martino reports, on this point, the evidences of some doctors of the previous centuries, as E. Ferdinando, L. Valletta, G. Baglivi.

Suddenly they stood up and started to dance in a quick and sometimes wild way for a very long time, usually two-three days (except the nights), with only a few pauses.

De Martino suggests that the rhythmic order of the sounds, thanks to its inner discipline, unblocked the basic sign of the life, that is the movement, preventing it from being a merely unrelated psychomotor release.

It is like if the order of the dance was a mediation between the stupor of the inertia and the uncoordinated explosion of vitality. The rite of the dance let the “tarantati” come back to the life under the protection of a rhythmic safe repetition.

From the investigation it emerged very clearly that the “tarantati” preferred some instruments and melodies rather than others, as it was also testified by many sources of the past.<sup>33</sup>

Together with the music, the songs contributed to define the character of the existential suffering of the “tarantato”.

The verses often hinted, in a dialogic form, to those parts of the body that, according to the “tarantati”, had been bitten by the spider: usually the hand, the foot, the pubes.

If the hand can be connoted as “armed” with the sword, and the foot “armed” with the dance, expressing therefore a symbol of a solving and fighting ritual, the pubes refers to the symbol of the precluded eros.

This symbol was associated sometimes with the longing for suicide, that took shape in the sufferer’s attempt to run toward the sea, with the aim to disappear amidst the waves. (De Martino 2002: 142)

The musicians employed in the rite of the exorcism had a quite important social role.

Yet in 1876, according to L. De Simone (in De Martino 2002: 130), there were famous musicians that played for the “tarantati”.

One of these was Francesco Mazzotta from Novoli, a blind violinist that had practised his profession for 30 years with an excellent skilfulness. He complained that in many places the musicians didn’t practise anymore the exploration with the twelve different melodies of the tradition, but they used only one melody.

This complaint describes the decay and the impoverishment of the tradition of Tarantism in the 19th century.

Also the chromatic symbolism was important in the rite of the exorcism, as it is attested by the literary sources.

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<sup>33</sup> De Martino reports evidences of E. Ferdinando, A. Kircher, L. Valletta, G. Baglivi, D. Cirillo, S. Storace. (2002: 134-140)

The “tarantati” were attracted by bright colours, especially red and blue, while they hated the black, as G. Baglivi informs us. (in De Martino 2002: 151)

The connection between music and colours is emphasized by E. Ferdinando, that speaks about two melodies, called “panno verde” (green cloth) and “panno rosso” (red cloth). (in De Martino 2002: 152)

From A. Kircher we know that the melody “panno verde” was used for joyful songs, while the melody “panno rosso” was used for martial songs. (in De Martino 2002: 152)

Kircher observed also that the red Tarantulas determine, with their bite, a preference for the red colour, the green Tarantulas a preference for the green, the yellow Tarantulas a preference for the yellow.

This means, according to De Martino, that the mythic Tarantula was in connection with mythic colours.

The chromatic exploration of Tarantism could be associated with the Medieval symbolism of the colours, where the green represents the new love while the red is in relation with the obstinacy and the competitive spirit. “/.../ the colours acquire the meaning of visual fields of stimulation, evocation and flow of affective conflicts that “prick” in secret”<sup>34</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 153)

There is also a seasonal symbolism.

The literary sources indicate that the crisis of Tarantism manifest themselves in the summer, starting from the month of May until the end of August.

Again, De Martino underlines that the real bite of the spider during the summer is a condition of the existence of Tarantism, but Tarantism cannot be reduced to it.

As a cultural phenomenon Tarantism has, instead, an essentially symbolic connection with the summer.

The Apulian summer “is not a sum of bare astronomical and meteorological data”<sup>35</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 158), but a concrete existential space.

It starts in the Middle Age and it lasts until the 18th century, connected with the economic and social context of the territory.

The hot and dry Apulian summer is also the season of the harvest, when the yearly agricultural activity is concluded and it is possible to make forecasts just on the base of the harvest: the granaries and the wine stores are filled and the debts are payed.

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<sup>34</sup> De Martino’s original: “/... /i colori acquistano il significato di piani visivi di stimolo, di evocazione e di deflusso di conflitti affettivi che “rimordono” in segreto”

<sup>35</sup> De Martino’s original: “non è un complesso di nudi dati astronomici e metereologici”

All the activities are full of a dramatic uncertainty and every small sign pushes people to believe in miracles but also to express anxiety, fear, anguish.

A so critical season for the surviving of a peasant society has all the characteristics to get a strong symbolic value and to provoke the explosion of the unresolved conflicts.

If in the economic sphere there was the possibility to pay the debts, “/.../on the symbolic level this was a period in which it could be possible to pay also the existential debts, accumulated in the bottom of the soul”<sup>36</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 159)

Unlike the rituals and the religions, that are substantially always consistent, because controlled by a clergy in accordance with the orthodoxy, Tarantism expresses a wide variety of symbols, showing its capacity to adapt itself to the different need of the “tarantati”.

Nevertheless, the constant presence of music, dance and colours gives stability to the rite.

The real hegemonic and unifying symbol of all Tarantism is the Tarantula itself.

The spider has different colours, it prefers some colours and melodies rather than others, its bite is musical.

It bites in summer, it can bite again. It has tendencies that are conveyed to the “tarantati”.

The Tarantulas are, then, spirits that possess their victims.

The symbolic dimension of Tarantism was already hinted in the 15th century by Leonardo da Vinci (in De Martino 2002: 173).

In a short annotation, in relation to the general symbolic interpretation of the animals, he wrote that “the bite of the Tarantula keeps the person in his intention, that is what he was thinking when he was bitten”<sup>37</sup>. [my translation]

According to De Martino, the symbol of Leonardo is a perfect synthesis of the mythic meaning of the Tarantula. The bite of the animal and its poison keep the person “tied to the unresolved critical episode, in the sense that the episode comes back indefinitely to impose itself as a coded neurotic symptom”<sup>38</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 176)

Tarantism, then, is a system of search and configuration of the crisis, that has its core in the symbol of the Tarantula, that bites, poisons and bites again.

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<sup>36</sup> De Martino's original: “/.../sul piano simbolico si trasfigurava in un periodo in cui potevano essere pagati anche i debiti esistenziali accumulati nel fondo dell'anima”.

<sup>37</sup> Leonardo's original: “Il morso della taranta mantiene l'omo nel suo proponimento, cioè quel che pensava quando fu morso”

<sup>38</sup> De Martino's original: “vincolato all'episodio critico irrisolto, nel senso che l'episodio torna indefinitamente a farsi valere come sintomo nevrotico crifrato”

In this frame the fact that the “tarantato” shall come back to the place of the first bite to be completely free, has a particular meaning. He shall find the removed conflictual content, that determines the cyclic suffering.

If in Leonardo’s short notation the Tarantula is symbol of the bad past recurrence, in the *Antonius* of G. Pontano (in De Martino 2002: 176), written in 1491, the Tarantula is symbol of the bad past outflow.

In a passage of this dialogue, one of the two protagonists thinks that the inhabitants of Apulia are very happy, because they can give vent to their madness under the appearance of a socially allowed behaviour, thanks to the Tarantula, considered the cause of their insane wishes.

Pontano is the first author that hints to Tarantism as a means of outflow of the psyche’s repressed contents.

In the following centuries the medical interpretation of the phenomenon let these original and interesting point of views fall down.

According to De Martino, Tarantism is a religion that can be defined with the word “rimorso”, that in Italian has a double meaning: “remorse” and “repeated bite”.

The religion of “rimorso” refers, then, both to the unresolved and sorrowful recurrence of a wrong choice and to the need of a choice that can repair the previous mistake, extinguishing the debt with the past.

In Tarantism there is no remorse for the memory of the past, but for the impossibility to remember it and to correct it. This brings, as a consequence, to bear it under the disguise of the neurosis.

This memory lapse, then, shapes as “first bite”, that is an external event, what in reality is an internal remorse, that is the unresolved conflict of the past.

On the other hand, thanks to the external symbol of the Tarantula, the removed psychic content re-emerges to the conscience, not as a symptom of illness but as a complex system of elaboration, through the rite of the music, dance and colours, that lets the sufferer have a renewal and a restoration.

The symbol of the Tarantula puts in movement a safety device, that has all the features of the cultural moulding: through its own horizon and the minor symbolic horizons that it heads, the single individual crisis are taken away from their neurotic incommunicability, in order to receive a common moulding in the behaviour of the poisoned person and to benefit from a common solving treatment/.../altogether oriented to the dismissal of the psychic passivities, according to a “pro-anno” posology that utilizes, with the collaboration of the



community, the plan of evocation and outflow of the myth and of the rite.<sup>39</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 178)

The symbol of the Tarantula, then, involves an idea of life in common that pushes the neurotic subject to go out of his isolation, by participating in a whole of beliefs supported by the tradition and shared by all the society.

For De Martino it is a sharing of an ethos that, although of less importance in the landscape of the Southern Italian cultural life, permits to identify Tarantism as a “religion of the remorse”, and the land where it developed as the “land of the remorse”. (2002: 179)

With regard to the links and the antecedents of Tarantism, De Martino underlines that it is very important to contextualize the phenomenon in the history of the western culture, but without reducing it to a “type” or to an “antecedent” or to a particular case of that extremely wide class of extinguished or still alive phenomena that he defines as “forms of lower mysticism”, “ecstatic cults”, “ritual possession”, “cerimonies of shamanic type”. (2002: 187) The risk of such reductionism originates by the temptation of considering Tarantism as a rest of elements that can be found in the classical world and generally in the religions of the ancient world.

Nevertheless, according to De Martino it is important to make a comparative study with similar phenomena and, above all, to search for the classical antecedents, just to point out the historical originality of Tarantism, that originated in the Medieval age.

In the wake of H. Jeanmarie (in De Martino 2002: 190), he limits the study of the ethnographic parallels to the orgiastic Greek cults and to the analogous African rites, because they participate, in some way, in the same cultural Proto-Mediterranean area.

The African rites (zar, bori) that can be connected with the Greek rites and with Tarantism are characterized by the daemons’ possession and by the dance and music treatment.

They are spread from the Nord Africa to the Arabic peninsula, to Ethiopia and Sudan.

In the Afro-American area there are similar cults, that have developed peculiar forms with specific names (macumbe, voodoo, santeria, condomblè).

Jeanmarie highlights that these rites, unlike the proper exorcism, that tries to chase away the spirit that has taken over the possessed person, are aimed to eliminate the depressing factor

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<sup>39</sup> De Martino’s original: “ Il simbolo della Tarantula mette in movimento un dispositivo di sicurezza che ha tutti i caratteri della plasmazione culturale: attraverso il suo proprio orizzonte e gli orizzonti simbolici minori cui presiede, le singole crisi individuali sono sottratte alla loro incomunicabilità nevrotica, per ricevere una comune plasmazione nel comportamento dell’avvelenato e per fruire di un comune trattamento risolutivo/.../orientato complessivamente verso la liquidazione delle passività psichiche, secondo una posologia “pro-anno” che utilizza, con la collaborazione della comunità, il piano di evocazione e di deflusso del mito e del rito.”

through a sort of reconciliation with the possessing spirit, that becomes the protecting spirit, and through a normalization of the crisis, in a form of a provoked trance.

De Martino points out that there are many analogies between these rites and Tarantism, for example the wide diffusion among the lower social classes, the prevalence of the female participation, the coexistence with “superior” religious forms, like Christianity for the Tarantism and Islamism for the African rites, the music and dance therapy, the existence of differences in the inclinations of the possessing spirit, comparable to the differences between the “licentious”, the “sad” or the “stormy” Tarantula.

The correlation between the spirit and the particular musical therapy establishes undeniable similarities.

The connection with the latrosectism, the syncretistic confusions about the catholic saints and the christian conception of the demoniac possession make difficult to identify the Tarantula with a protecting spirit, but many aspects of the rite go however in this direction.

The “tarantati”, for instance, specially if women, speak and come to terms with the Tarantula, they obtain by the spider gifts of clairvoyance, they observe sexual abstinence and they don’t eat meat in the period before summer.

All this is not exactly the connotation of the Tarantula as a protecting spirit, but it is surely not the canonical exorcism based on the expulsion of an “evil spirit”.

It is rather a “normalization of the crisis”, like the one that Jeanmarie detects in the practices of the Afro-American rites.

But these rites present also many differences with Tarantism.

In Voodoo, for example, there are many “loa”<sup>40</sup>, while in Tarantism there is only the “loa” of the Tarantula; in Voodoo there are sanctuaries and priests, in Tarantism there is nothing of this.

On the base of these similarities and differences, De Martino thinks that it is possible, in the case of Voodoo and Tarantism, to speak about “parallel and independent developments originated by a common cultural home”<sup>41</sup>. [my translation] (2002: 195)

Another similarity, according to De Martino, can be found in the scientific interpretation of the phenomena, because also the African and Afro-American rites have been reduced to a neurotic illness.

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<sup>40</sup> Voodoo recognizes one God, Bondye or Gran Met. However, there are a host of spirits or deities called “loa”, which act as intermediaries between humans and God. The “loa”, unlike Christian angels or devils, have significant powers relatively independent of God, and embody both positive and negative forces within the same loa.

<sup>41</sup> De Martino’s original: “sviluppi paralleli e indipendenti a partire da una comune patria culturale”.

In this perspective, but in a more even evaluation, A. Métreaux (in De Martino 2002: 195) highlights that, also if the initial phase of the possession is assimilable to the psychopathology, the trance has a disciplined character and it is resolute in a psychological respect when a precise “loa” emerges in the possessed person, giving him a model to follow faithfully.

He observes that, in the natives’ view, to be possessed by the “loa” is different from being possessed by the “evil spirits”, that is terrible and it is considered an illness.

Unlike the hysteria, in which anguishes and wishes express themselves with symptoms, the possessed person, in Voodoo, identifies with a traditional ritual image.

The trance, for Metreaux, is a psychological device that is useful to the balance and to the mental health of the group, that avoids the individual multiplicity of the aspects of the neurosis and of the psychosis, typical of our society, that could be uncontrollable in these contexts.

With regard to the parallels with the European folk and religious phenomena, De Martino dwells upon those of Spain and Sardinia.

In his view the similarities are not in relation with the symbols and the therapy of the possession, like for the Afro-American rites, but they concern the function of the music and the dance as a repairing exorcism of the bite of a mythically moulded animal<sup>42</sup>.

In Sardinia the “argia” is considered a mythic animal, not reducible to any real species of beasts.

It bites in the summer time and it is distinguished into three categories: the unmarried, the married and the widowed.

The treatment, that depends on the type of the “argia” responsible for the bite, consists in the musical exploration and therapy, like in Tarantism.

But, unlike Tarantism, the number of the bitten men is higher than the women and there is no recurrence of the bite. Moreover, in the therapy there is the use of a tepid oven, while the water and the flower scenery are absent. (De Martino 2002: 195 -197)

About the historical and cultural context of Tarantism, De Martino identifies in the classical Greek world and in its province of Magna Graecia the tightest antecedents of the phenomenon, reporting on this point many evidences of ancient Greek authors.

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<sup>42</sup> De Martino hints only to the ritual “argia” in Sardinia, because the documentation about the Spanish and the Sardinian rites is incomplete.

The symbol of the bite, the water and flower scenery, the swing, the sword, the mirror and the music therapy are, in fact, all present in the religious Greek world and they do constitute, according to De Martino, the antecedents of Tarantism.

The bite (“oistros” in old Greek ), intended as a pressing bite, had in the Greek culture a symbolic autonomy and a great importance.

Aeschylus, for example, especially in the *Prometheus* (in De Martino 2002: 20), gives a strong dramatic concreteness to the symbol of the bite in relation to the figure of Io, the wandering virgin victim of Hera’s jealousy.

Io is a victim of the precluded love: Zeus transforms her in a heifer, to possess her as a bull, but Hera orders Argus, the cowherd with hundred eyes, to look after her. Hermes, sent by Zeus, kills Argus, but Hera sends a gadfly to continuously bite Io, forcing her to run without any stopping.

In the end Prometheus communicates to Io that her wandering will finish on the shores of the river Nile, where Zeus will give her a child with the touch of his hand.

The Pseudo-Hippocrates (in De Martino 2002: 204), in his treatise on the illnesses of the women, describes the frequent crisis of the women without children and of the young girls. First they felt in a sort of stupor, then they had fever with tremors and, after some time, they were affected by the mania, with anguish and explosions of fury and impulses to suicide by drowning or hanging.

Plutarch (in De Martino 2002: 204) speaks about a collective explosion of such mania in Miletus, where the virgins were taken by an incoercible impulse to suicide by hanging. Nobody could dissuade them, until a legislator decided that the corpses of the suicided women should be exposed naked and with a rope around the neck in the market-place. Such a law succeeded in stopping the epidemic.

Aristoxenos from Taranto (in De Martino 2002: 205) speaks about an epidemic in Magna Graecia, during which the women left their home and towns to follow some voices that they heard. The consulted oracle prescribed to sing a specific type of melody (the so called “peana”) for fourteen days in the spring time and in this way the problem was solved.

All these episodes testify, according to De Martino,

.../the frequent crisis of maladjustment that in the Greek world risked to hit collectively the women in relation with their biological and cultural destiny of spouses and mothers. Furthermore from these evidences it comes out that stupor, anguish, delirium, fury, and first

of all escape and suicidal impulses by hanging or drowning constituted at least some of the most evident characters of the crisis<sup>43</sup>. [my translation] (2002: 205)

The diffusion and the intensity of the crisis of the female world, is in tight connection with the mythic and ritual horizon of Maenadism.

Maenads, Bacchantes, Thyads, Basserids, Dismantai, Clodones testify, already in the variety of the names, the importance of the women in relation with the orgiastic aspects of the cult of Dionysus.

In the past such importance has been reduced in some way, on the base of the difficulty to match the proverbial austerity of the Greek woman together with the participation in these rites.

De Martino, on the contrary, underlines that exactly in the repressive and androcratic societies the removed psychic content is expressed in forms of neurotic symptoms and behaviours, that are incompatible with the social order and that request, therefore, an appropriate preventive and resolute treatment.

Maenadism represented a violent fracture between the women and the civil order. Pushed by the goad of Dionysos (“kentron” in old Greek ), they escaped in direction of the woods and the waters during the night, to meet secretly.

But at the same time Maenadism was oriented towards the control and the resolution of their disorders.

The places of the cult were, in fact, isolated in the mountains or near the rivers or in closed places that reproduced the natural water and flower scenery.

The escape was moulded and enclosed in a meaningful frame that let the critical psychic contents outflow in a mythical and ritual order. The escape became retreat, transformation and acceptance of the destiny, with the re-entry in the community. (De Martino 2002: 207)

De Martino compares this rite with the ceremonials of escape, chase, ritual immersions, of dance and bloody sacrifices that originated in the archaic tribal initiations in relation with the age of puberty and that merged with the Mystery’s religions in the classical world.

Particularly significant, in relation with the the Greek antecedents of Tarantism, is the symbol of the swing in the Greek mythology.

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<sup>43</sup> De Martino’s original: “/.../le frequenti crisi di disadattamento che nel mondo greco rischiavano di colpire collettivamente le donne in rapporto al loro destino biologico e culturale di spose e di madri. Inoltre da tali testimonianze si ricava che stupore, angoscia, delirio, furore, e soprattutto fuga e impulsi suicidi per impiccagione o per annegamento costituivano almeno alcuni dei caratteri più vistosi della crisi”.

De Martino (2002: 209), following the description made by Pausania of the “Nekyia” painted by Polignotus, highlights the symbolic meaning of the swing (“aioresis” or “aiora” in old Greek), that referred to the hanging, that is the suicidal procedure very often used by the women in the course of their crisis.

The rite of the “aioresis” resumed and directed the distinguishing aspects of the female crisis, rendering them innocuous for the social order.

Like the escape was transformed in a retreat and the drowning in a cathartic immersion in the water, the hanging was transformed in the image of the swing.

This moulding was represented by the feast of the “Aiora”, which originated. from the myth of Herigon.

Herigon was the daughter of Icarius, who had received as a gift by Dionysus the grapevine and the ability of making wine.

While wandering the village with wineskins to spread its knowledge, Icarius was accused for having poisoned some shepherds. Because of it, he was killed and buried near a tree. The daughter Herigon found his corpse and she hung herself in desperation on the tree where his father was buried<sup>44</sup>.

Dionysus decided to harshly punish the Athenians for this crime, sending a pestilence and making the virgin girls crazy, so that they hung themselves on the trees, like Herigon had done before.

To send away this misfortune, the feast of the “Aiora” of the virgins was established, where the girls mimed the search for the lost father of Herigon. This search was called “wandering” (“aletis” in old Greek), term that was extended also to the song of the “Aiora” and to the entire feast.

The feast included fruit offers to Icarius and the display of hung dolls on the trees.

It was performed during the “Anthesteries”, that is the spring feast of the sprouts, a sort of a rural New Year’s Day, when

*.../the passivities of the previous year were liquidated, the contracted debt with the world of the dead were settled, the fertility and the fortune of the following year was prefigured and assured.”<sup>45</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 210)*

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<sup>44</sup> After this, Icarius was put, by the Gods, in the sky as Boote or Arthur while Herigon became the constellation of the Virgin.

<sup>45</sup> De Martino’s original: “.../si liquidavano le passività dell’anno spirante, si regolavano i debiti contratti con il mondo dei morti, si prefigurava e assicurava la fecondità e la fortuna dell’anno spravveniente”.

The “Antheities”, therefore, besides the rural meaning, had a manifold symbolic value, inside which De Martino considers with special attention the symbol of the crisis of puberty in the women.

The myth represents very well the contradictory and painful moments of this passage.

The risk of a failed separation from the father could generate in the female an unconscious conflict characterized by the guilty feeling for the violent death of the father and by the refusal of becoming a woman.

These impulses, encrypted in the unconscious, express themselves in the conscious life in the wish of escape (separation, killing of the father) and of suicide (refusal of the destiny, expiation of the guilt).

In the feast of the “Aiora” the girls, miming the search of Herigon, looked for the killed father, and through the swing and the hung dolls on the trees, they gave vent, in a symbolic and therefore mitigated and inoffensive way, to the suicidal impulse, which contained in itself the negation of the new status as a woman but also the expiation of the guilt for the father’s death.

The rite was accompanied by the song “aletis”, that marked the rhythmic oscillation of the swing.

The importance of the “aioresis” in the chatartic of the Greek world can be inferred also by Platon (in De Martino 2002: 211). In the *Laws* he explains that the fears of the childhood and adolescence can be calmed with a rhythm that from outside affects the inner flows, overlapping and regulating them, exactly like it happens in the Bacchic rites and in a baby’s rock.

On this point Platon observes that the mothers, when their babies cannot sleep, don’t give them rest but movement, and they don’t stay in silence but they sing a lullaby, like in the treatment of the Bacchic rites, based on dance and music.

In the *Timeus* Platon (in De Martino 2002: 211) refers to the curative power of the rhythm as imitation of the Nature, “nourisher and mother of the all”, cosmic cradle of all the bodies.

Also the “aioresis” symbolizes a cradling, the one of the mother’s arms, in a sort of extreme memory, that functions as instrument of recovery and settlement of the infant situations to which we are bound.

Through its passive movement, based on a continuous going forward and backward, the “aioresis” lets disperse the immediate living experience, giving place, instead, to calm and sleep.

Furthermore the swing symbolizes the separation that the girls realize thanks to their own push or to the push of somebody else, for example the spouse.

Finally the swing can represent an embrace, symbol of the future destiny of a virgin. (De Martino 2002: 212)

In Tarantism the symbol of the swing assumes also the value of the imitation of the spider, as hanging animal.

It's difficult to find a connection in the Greek world between the hanging, the swing and the spider that hangs from his net. Some indications come from the myth of Aracne, described by Ovid in the *Metamorphosis* (in De Martino 2002: 216).

The young girl Lidia, a skillful weaver, challenged the goddess Athena in a wave competition. Athena, angry for the ability of the girl, transformed her in a spider, keeping her from the project of suicide by hanging, but condemning her to hang on the net.

The myth shows that the symbolic connection between the hanging and the spider was known in the Greek world. It indicates also another connection with the hard loom-work of the women, subject to the onset of psychic disorders.

The symbol of the mirror, often present in Tarantism, was an important element in the Greek rites too, in connection with the preparation for the wedding.

The mirror represents also a moment of narcissistic regression, in a sort of evocation of the bad past, necessary to the outflow of the unsolved conflicts. (De Martino 2002: 217)

The musical cathartic, in the Greek world, is rarely testified in the treatment of the bite of the spider, but it is very frequent in the treatment of every type of disorders in connection with the possession of daemons, gods or dead people.

In the Greek culture the illness was not a specific prerogative of the soma or of the psyche, but it belonged to the both and so to the moral and religious sphere, making pertinent the constant use of a musical cathartic therapy.

Platon (in De Martino 2002: 220), both in the *Euthidemus* and in the *Ione*, in a context of philosophical argumentations, hints to two different moments of the practices of the Corybants.

The first is in connection with the dance, that was performed with musical instruments, around the person to be initiated; the second is related with the execution of the "right" melody, associated with the possessing god.



These elements, the exploration and the execution of the “right” melody on one side and the passage from the inertia to the dance on the other side, are typical of Tarantism.

Always Platon (in De Martino 2002: 223), in the *Phaedrus*, distinguishes two types of mania, one due to the illness and the other inspired by the gods.

The last one is divided in four types, and the second is in relation with the orgiastic cults: it is inspired by Dionysus and it is called “telestica” in old Greek .

It starts from a moment of pathological risk and then, through the ritual, it finds its solution.

This mania is also called “right madness”, because it has the premises of the movement toward the reason through the regulated enthusiasm of the rites.

According to Platon, then, the religious mania is something else from the psychic disorders, and the rite intervenes in the crisis to transform and to solve it.

In the Pythagoreans’ circle of Pythagora, Archita, Aristoxenos, the musical cathartic had an extraordinary importance in Magna Graecia, both in the theorization and in the practice. The application field was very wide, from the therapy of the somatic disturbs (like the sciatic) to the therapy of the psychic disturbs (to calm the anger) and of the moral disturbs (the music performed with the flute and the cithara was considered effective in order to moderate the customs and to favour a good activity of the government). (De Martino 2002: 225)

Furthermore, Taranto was known in Magna Graecia for its intense participation in the cult of Dionysus; Platon (in De Martino 2002: 225) writes in the *Laws* that during the feasts in honour of the god the inhabitants of the town were all drunk.

Finally Taranto and the region of Apulia were theatre of the cruel repression of the orgiastic cults that, after the 3th century A.C., was carried out by the Roman empire, afraid that these cults could destabilize Rome itself, where they were already wide spread, in opposition to the official religion.

Although its strong connection with the Greek culture, Tarantism, according to De Martino, originated and developed in Apulia in the Medieval age, precisely between the 9th and the 14th century A.C., in relation with the clash between Islam and Christianity for the political, cultural and religious power in the Mediterranean area.

In the land of Apulia, in fact, Muslims and Christians clashed in many fights, with lots of blood-shed. Here the Muslims arrived from the East with the aim to invade the West countries; from here the crusaders left with their ships in direction of Jerusalem.

In De Martino's view, the phenomenon of Tarantism originated from real episodes of latrosectism, but it elaborated its symbol with a relative cultural autonomy, inside the Medieval historical context, that moulded the ancient Greek rites. (2002: 232)

From the Medieval chronicles we have very few informations about the Tarantula and its bite, and there isn't any direct reference to the region of Apulia or to the musical exorcism.

Albertus Aquensis (in De Martino 2002: 229), in his *Historia Hierosolymitanae expeditionis* reports that, during the first Crusade in the 11th cent. A.C., the Christian army, camped near the river Nahr el-Kebir, in Syria, was tormented by the Tarantulas. Some crusaders were bitten and they died. Among the remedies, there was a special one: the poisoned men should lie with women and the poisoned women with men. In this way they could free themselves of the poison.

In his *Historia Sicula*, Goffredo Malaterra (in De Martino 2002: 229) reports that the Norman army, under Roger and Robert Guiscard, during the siege of Palermo against the Muslims, in 1072, was tormented in the camps by the Tarantulas and they had to use the remedy of the hot oven.

In the study of De Martino, the passage from the Greek antecedents to the Medieval Tarantism is well highlighted by the figure of St Paul and his strong polemics against the Chorintian Church.

Already in his conversion St Paul experienced, at the midday on the way to Damascus, the "goad" of God, in the same way as Io (the lover of Zeus) and the Maenads were subject to the "kentron" (goad) and to the "oistros" (bite) of the God.

But there is an enormous distance between the goad of Io and the Maenads and the goad of St Paul, both for the different orientation of the resolution of St Paul's crisis and for the different cultural values in which the Christian God fits in.

From St Paul's first letter to Corinthians we can immediately see, as a fundamental principle, that the Christian God belongs to the sphere of the "nous" (intellect, reason in old Greek).

Through the "nous", God speaks to the community of the believers, that participates all together in the "agape", the banquet where they receive the moral energy.

In St Paul's letter I, 13.11 we read: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become man, I have put away childhood things". [my translation] (in De Martino 2002: 236)

In his letter I, 14.23 St Paul underlines that “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace”. [my translation] (in De Martino 2002: 236)

In this way St Paul wanted to condemn the pneumatic anarchy of the Corinthian church, in which the rites were performed in the chaos of the music and they were nothing else, according to him, than daemonic temptations.

Their sacral meaning, linked to the orgiastic cults, was totally repudiated by him, exactly like the role that the women had inside them.

In his letter I, 14.34-35, in fact, he says:

As in all the assemblies of the saints, let your wives keep silent in the assemblies, for they have not been permitted to speak; but let them be in subjection, as the law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to chatter in the assembly. [my translation] (S. Paolo, La sacra Bibbia: 1999)

The image of the Greek Maenad, half-dressed and with ruffled hairs in the wind, has been substituted by a submissive woman, that stays silent and with her head covered by a voile in a church dominated by the men.

She is now subject to God and Christ through her subjection to the man.

The passage from the pagan to the Christian horizon gradually happened in all Europe, where the pagan feasts were substituted by the Christian ones.

In particular, the feasts of St John (24th of June) and St Veit (15th of June) were the most important Medieval performances of dance, in which, at least at the beginning but not only, it was difficult to direct the subversive energies of the participants into disciplined and controllable forms. According to Philippe De Felice (*Foules en delire, extase collectives* 1947) the phenomenon had a character of psychic disorder, it appeared in specific seasons of the year and it infected entire communities, as it is testified by many episodes, like the famous one of Kolbig, in 1021, during Christmas time. (in De Martino 2002: 238)

J. F. C. Hecker (in De Martino 2002: 238) remarks that in 1347, during the feast of St John, the dance epidemic spread from Aquisgrana to Liegi, Utrecht, Tongern, Koln, Metz.

These performances were characterized by the raving and disordered agitation of men and women, that behaved as real possessed, far from any ritual dance.

There is no evidence, moreover, of musical disciplines in the chronicles of the Middle Age.

In the following centuries, anyway, the musical cathartic became an important element in the dance epidemics. In Strasbourg, for example, in 1518, during a dance epidemic, the municipal Council, in order to face up to the disorders provoked by the multitude that danced on flutes’

and drums' rhythm, had to find some places suitable to the dance and to procure a sufficient number of musicians to let the possessed people dance until the loss of conscience.

The dance went on in the Chapel-cave of St Veit, near Zabern, around his altar, until the dancers were exhausted and fell down. (De Martino 2002: 238)

The crisis of St Veit was a sort of enchantment or witchcraft, as we can see by the fact that in 1485 curses like "Gott geb dir Sankt Veit" (I hope that God sends you St Veit) or "Dass dich Snakt Veit ankame" (I hope you can have St Veit) were already indictable in the legislation of the town of Rottweil. (De Martino 2002: 239)

A. Martin quotes the evidence of Horstius, doctor of Ulma in the beginning of the 17th century, about a ceremonial configuration of the crisis of St Veit.

This ceremony was celebrated every year in the period of the feast of the Saint and it included a dance and musical treatment:

I remember- says Horstius- that I spoke with some women, every year they visit the Chapel of St Veit in Drefelhausen, not far from Eisingen, near Weissenstein, in Ulma's territory. These women dance day and night and with twisted senses, until they fall in trance, and in this way they seem to recover, so that they don't have anymore problem for the rest of the year, until the next May, when they feel a strong agitation in the body, as they say, and they are therefore forced to go to the Chapel of St Veit to dance once again. One of these women has danced in the Chapel for 20 years, another for 32 years/.../ [my translation] (in De Martino 2002: 239)

But the dance epidemics of Northern Europe were not aimed to an order or to an efficacy based on the musical and dance rhythm, as we are informed by H. Gruber (in De Martino 2002: 240), doctor of Lubeck in the second half of the 17th century. He noticed that the so-called dancers of St John and St Veit, differently by the people affected by Tarantism, that danced only with the music and that stopped if the music stopped, moved and agitated "independently from the music", without any psychomotor or dancing order.

From the existing documentation, then, according to De Martino, it results that

/.../Tarantism had a larger cultural autonomy, a more specific symbolic elaboration, and a more stable restoring efficacy: it posed as regularly functioning institution, while the "dance" of St John and St Veit appeared much poorer of institutional meaning, and much nearer to the character of single significant episodes of terrifying collective psychic disorders/.../<sup>46</sup> [my translation] (2002: 240)

The famous and oldest document that connects the musical exorcism and the bite of the Tarantula is the *Sertum papale de venenis* of Guglielmo di Marra from Padova (in De

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<sup>46</sup> De Martino's original: ".../il tarantismo possedeva una più larga autonomia culturale, una sua più specifica elaborazione simbolica, ed una più stabile efficacia reintegratrice: si atteggiava cioè ad istituto regolarmente funzionante, mentre il "ballo" di S. Giovanni e di S. Vito appariva molto più povero di significato istituzionale, e molto più prossimo al carattere di singoli memorandi episodi di terrificanti disordini psichici collettivi/.../"

Martino 2002: 137), written about 1362. With regard to the poison of the Tarantula, the writer reports that, according to the popular tradition, the Tarantula sings while it bites and this is the reason why the bitten person, by listening to a melody that matches with the Tarantula's song, feels a great benefit.

From the *Sertum Papale* onwards, Tarantism came into the western culture.

The interest for the phenomenon took two directions: one of musicological type, concerning the music's effects on the mind and the soul, another of medical type, about the nature of the illness.

The main exponent of the first direction was A. Kircher, interested in the relations between music and medicine, in the wake of Humanism and Renaissance.

The second direction started with the doctors G. Baglivi and E. Ferdinando and it arrived to the Neapolitan Enlightenment school, with T. Cornelio and F. Serao.

The renewed interest for the classical world in the age of Humanism and Renaissance, let the Hippocratic humoral pathology and the theories of the meaning of the music of Pythagoras and Platon came back in favour.

The idea of the illness as a consequence of the modification of the balance of the humours, together with elements of natural magic, started off the researchers on a symbolic system of correspondences between the human body and the macrocosm, with an explicit relation between the internal and the external harmony, where the music, with its harmony, played a fundamental role as iatromusic.

Tarantism, in the perspective of the iatromusic, represented the most clamorous proof of this role. That's the reason why the most famous scholar of the iatromusic of the Baroque age, Athanasius Kircher, was so interested in the phenomenon. His most important works are *Magnes sive de Arte magnetica opus tripartitum* (1641) and *Musurgia universalis sive ars magna consoni et dissoni* (1650).

He shared the popular ideology of the Tarantula and he tried to give it a scientific dignity, by attempting to explain it in the frame of the magnetism, the iatromusic and the humoral pathology.

He gave this ideology a very big diffusion, keeping the connection of the crisis, the treatment and the recovery, that is the integrity of the cultural phenomenon. (De Martino 2002: 244)

Kircher has the merit to have handed down to us both the cultural data, the texts and the songs that otherwise could have been lost, and the tradition of the iatromusic.

The medical approach to the problem was different. The medical science valued under its point of view the popular beliefs, letting them fall down when they were unfounded.

Tarantism, therefore, was reduced to an illness, with the progressive devaluation of the popular ideology. It was considered a toxic condition or a psychic disorder or a combination of the both. All the rest, included the musical therapy, was completely extraneous to this point of view.

Epifanio Ferdinando (*Centum historiae seu observationes et casus medici* 1621) and Giorgio Baglivi (“De anatome morsu et effectibus tarantulae” 1754), followed the popular ideology of the Tarantula, believing in its bite, but Baglivi, probably thanks to a better clinical observation, marked that not all the “tarantati” were bitten by the Tarantula.

To win this inconsistency, he devised the “small Carnivals of the women”, that indicated, as we have already seen, the simulation that the women made to give vent to their wishes under the pretext of Tarantism. (De Martino 2002: 247)

The medical science, then, although still believing in the power of the “real” Tarantula, began to distinguish and to mark the cases that seemed reducible to melancholy.

In a short time, the Napolitan Enlightenment medical school eliminated every credibility to the toxic hypothesis.

In 1672 T. Cornelio (in De Martino 2002: 57), a Napolitan Philosopher and Physician, in a letter published in England asserted that the “tarantati” were “dolci di sale” (“sweet of salt”: an expression that is still used today in the South of Italy is used to define a person that is not intelligent), because they ascribed to the Tarantula the responsibility of their melancholy.

Francesco Serao, with his *Lezioni sulla Tarantula* (1738), on the base of his direct observations, asserted that the cause of Tarantism was not the spider but the inhabitants of Apulia, incapable to keep still and always willing to give vent to their disposition to the melancholy in the dance. In some extreme conditions they turned to Tarantism institution, heir of the ancient orgiastic cults.

The fame of his *Lessons* was so high that in the scientific community many thought that Kircher’s perspective and Tarantism itself had been defeated. (De Martino 2002: 248)

But this claim is only partially true. Serao, in fact, destroyed the perspective of Kircher, letting the conflict between myth and Enlightenment blow up, but he didn’t destroy

Tarantism, as it is testified by the analysis of Francesco de Raho in 1908, also if the scholar remarks that the phenomenon was on decline in that time. (De Martino 2002: 254)

Through the neglect and the discredit of the theories of Kircher, the link between the high levels of the cultural life and Tarantism was broken.

Tarantism was then relegated to a popular superstition, considered half illness and half fanaticism.

On the other side, in the second half of the 18th century, the church imposed a more direct control on Tarantism through the cult of St Paul, that was venerated in the chapel of Galatina. St Paul appeared both as the protector of the “tarantati” and as the sender of the Tarantulas, in order to punish some guilt: a “St Paul-Tarantula” and a “Tarantula St Paul”.

The saint was known for his miracle in the isle of Malt, where he didn't receive any damage from the bite of a snake, as we read in the Apostolic Acts (in De Martino 2002: 46).

According to the legends, St Paul came to Galatina incognito, in one of his journeys, to escape persecutions, and he was received and protected by a religious man in the house that afterwards became “St Paul's house”.

To recompense him for the hospitality, the saint allowed the man and his descendants to heal the persons who were bitten by poisoned animals by making the sign of the cross on the injury and letting them drink the water of the house's well.

After that the man and his descendants died, the poisoned persons continued to have the same miraculous effect by drinking the water and asking the grace of the Saint.

This story was told in the 18th century by the doctor N. Caputo (in De Martino 2002: 107).

He testifies, then, that in the first half of the century there was a miraculous well in Galatina, in “St Paul's house”, where the “tarantati” during the summer assembled to ask the grace.

Already before this time, in the 16th century the so called “St Paolari” (followers of St Paul), wandered in the Apulian fields boasting their healing power as descendants of St Paul. They sold the land of Malt, that was considered miraculous against the bite of the poisoned animals. According to De Martino, in the 18th century the local clergy built the chapel of St Paul in Galatina<sup>47</sup> exactly to stop the phenomenon of the “St Paolari” and to take under its own control the phenomenon, instilling inside it “a slow but inexorable poison”. (De Martino 2002: 256)

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<sup>47</sup> The chapel is built in “S. Paul's house” in the center of Galatina and it is frequented still today by the believers, also if its conditions are very degraded.

This was not a collision between magic and science, but a collision in the religious symbolism itself, originated with St Paul's letters to the Corinthians at Christianity's dawn.

After the 18th century, the decline of Tarantism continued in a hybrid syncretism that disarticulated the myth of the Tarantula, while the growing obstacles in the practice of the exorcism let withdraw Tarantism to illness.

De Martino thinks that Tarantism felt in crisis in the end of the 18th century because of the combined action, on different levels, of the Napolitan Enlightenment and of the cult of St Paul in the chapel of Galatina.

From then on the process began, of disgregation of the phenomenon, that De Martino observes in its extreme phase on the 29th of June 1959.

On this point, he disclaims the theory of H. E. Sigerist, expounded in his *The story of Tarantism* (1948), according to which Tarantism is a sort of disguise of the ancient orgiastic rites under the prohibitionist pressure of the Christian power.

For De Martino it is not a question of a disguise but of a changed cultural context, dominated by the Napolitan Enlightenment, that reduced the rite to illness, establishing in this way the end of its circulation among the cultural elites. (2002: 257- 258)

Anyway the process of disgregation of the ideology of the Tarantula met a strong resistance, especially from Ludovico Valletta (*De phalangio Apulo* 1706) and Nicola Caputo (*De Tarantulae anatome et morsu* 1741).

As regards Serao and his *Lessons*, De Martino remarks that the scholar was right in defining Tarantism an institution, but his mistake was to consider the phenomenon a psychic illness.

In the 19th century the issue of Tarantism was considered under the light of Positivism. The specialization of the medical science, developed just in that period, produced the definitive oblivion of the hypothesis of the cultural institution, in favour of a bitter dispute on the "type" of illness, if of psychiatric or toxicological origin. The psychiatric option was the most supported, but it didn't eliminate the other. In this perspective Salvatore De Renzi wrote his "Osservazioni sul tarantismo in Puglia" (1832).

In the 20th century, H.Sigerist (1948), and W. Katner (1956), had considered, besides the medical aspects, also the historical and cultural ones, but it was necessary, according to De Martino, to change the perspective, assuming the historical and cultural view as the most important, open to an interdisciplinary collaboration with the other sciences.



This also because the unproductiveness of the medical perspective had brought Tarantism to come in contact “with the irrationalistic themes of the contemporary culture”<sup>48</sup> [my translation] (De Martino 2002: 267)

The musicologist Marius Schneider, in fact, had proposed in *La danza de espadas y la tarantela* (1948), a vision of Tarantism that De Martino considers a modernization of Kircher’s perspective.

For Schneider Tarantism was focused on the symbol-animal of the Tarantula. The musical and dance therapy was a “medical rite”, a passage from the outward death to the prospering life through the inversion realized by the dance.

De Martino thinks that the symbolic interpretation of Schneider is correct but that the method that he uses in his studies is wrong. In Schneider’s research, in fact, the centrality of the symbol of Tarantism and its integration stay in a system of cosmic correspondences that doesn’t find concrete and precise confirmation.

It means that there is no verification of the hypothesis, and all the other conjectures that contradict this mystic mythopoeia are excluded.

The interpretation of Schneider leaves voluntarily Tarantism in the field of irrationality and it doesn’t let us know anything by saying that Tarantism is placed in a wide and universal mystic scenery.

A correct research, based on a historicist perspective, should analyse, on the contrary, the irrational or seemingly irrational behaviours of the individuals and of the communities in order to understand them in the light of the culture that has generated and influenced them. (De Martino 2002: 268)

After De Martino, and especially in these last years, in which there has been a renewed interest for Tarantism, together with the explosion of the enthusiasm of the masses for the Pizzica – Pizzica dance, many scholars have tried to go beyond the contribution of the anthropologist (recognized by everyone as the most important), and to establish parallels with various forms of possession, trance and sciamanic rites, up to trace analogies with aspects of the contemporary youth culture.

Gianfranco Salvatore (2000) suggests to “rethink the Tarantism as a repeatedly hybridized ritual in the time”.<sup>49</sup> [my translation] (Salvatore 2000: 48)

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<sup>48</sup> De Martino’s original: “con i temi irrazionalistici della cultura contemporanea”

<sup>49</sup> Salvatore’s original: “ripensare il Tarantismo come un rituale ripetutamente ibridatosi nel tempo”

For him the phenomenon, although with precise cultural antecedents, shall not be considered peculiar of a historical period and of a certain geographically limited area, as it is for De Martino, but as one of the products of a wider culture of the Mediterranean area and of the human sphere in general, as a result of “more stratified syncretisms”. (Salvatore 2000: 44)

By re-evaluating the sources, acquired meanwhile in a more complete way, Tarantism could be possibly re-considered as a phenomenon of a more general culture of the Mediterranean Dionisysm.

Tarantism was nothing else than a musical therapy/.../of the poisoned bites/.../ a ritual of trance historically fitting in the Mediterranean traditions/.../<sup>50</sup> [my translation] (Salvatore 2000: 47)

Pierpaolo De Giorgi (1999) moves in a similar perspective, basing his interpretation on the idea of unification of the symbols of the different cultures. He is a follower of Schneider, considered by him the theorizer of “a symbolic thought, formulated in the most homogeneous way by the megalithic civilization, that attributes to the music an ontological primary meaning and a power that unifies all the reality”<sup>51</sup> [my translation] (De Giorgi 1999: 53)

Gilbert Rouget (1986) is one of the first scholars that has subjected the *Land of Remorse* to an important and organic revision, also if with a great respect for De Martino.

He asserts that “/.../Tarantism is nothing else than a cult of possession that doesn’t dare to define itself as such” [my translation] (Rouget 1986: 219)

He remarks in “Tarantismo, «musica giusta» e iniziazione” (2004) that the crise of Tarantism is not solved by an exorcism, but by a reconciliation with the spider, through its imitation in the dance, in a sort of “theatre of the possession”. (Rouget 2004: 49)

In the Middle Age, Tarantism couldn’t express itself as a cult of possession, because of the power of the Inquisition and of the risks connected with it. This is the reason why the “tarantati” attributed to a spider what the other rites attributed to a god or to spirits, and they didn’t know the meaning that the symbol of the spider had in the past, when the censorship had not yet intervened.

Rouget focuses his attention on the dimension of the trance that characterizes Tarantism as a the phases of possession.

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<sup>50</sup> Salvatore’s original: “il Tarantismo non era altro che una terapia musicale/.../dei morsi velenosi/.../un rituale di transe storicamente inquadrabile nelle tradizioni del Mediterraneo/.../”

<sup>51</sup> De Giorgi’s original: “un pensiero simbolico, formulato nel modo più omogeneo dalla civiltà megalitica, che attribuisce alla musica un significato onotologico primario e una forza unificante tutta la realtà”

He agrees with George Lapassade (1993), who considers the trance as a modified state of consciousness, culturally elaborated, socialized and ritualized”. [my translation] (Lapassade 1993: 41)

In this modified state, the mental faculties and the physical forces are increased: “the trance occurs always/.../as an overcoming, as a liberation/.../, as an exaltation –sometimes selfdestructive- of the self” [my translation] (Rouget 1986: 26)

Like Rouget, then, also Lapassade, in *Gente nell’ombra. Transe e possessione* (2005), considers Tarantism a cult of possession that has lost the conscience of itself.

The removal of the meaning and the lack of consciousness of participating in ritual trances don’t invalidate the value of this hypothesis but, on the contrary, they strengthen it.

The dance of the “tarantati”, because of this removal, didn’t appear as a trance (the “tarantati”, in fact, were usually conscious), but it had many characteristics that are typical of the trance, as the hypnotic and somnambulistic aspect, the convulsive movements, the insensibility to the pain. (Rouget 2004: 49)

Tarantism, therefore, can be framed as a ritual dance, also if the dance is not provoked by a possessing daemon but by the possessing poison of the spider.

The cult of St Paul, considered in a more general cult of the saints inside Catholicism, Islam, Judaism from Maghreb, Macumba from Brasil, Voodoo from Haiti, enters forcefully in this context.

St Paul is not only a healer but also a protector of the Tarantula and he is identified by many people with the Tarantula.

According to Lapassade, in conclusion, Tarantism is “a masked ball of the possession”, in which the therapeutic trance pursues both the exorcism, that is the expulsion of the poison, and the “adorcism”<sup>52</sup>, that is an attempt to reconcile with the spider and to conclude an alliance “tarantato”-Tarantula. (Lapassade 2005: 122)

The last investigations on Tarantism move in the wake of Lapassade (1997), in the perspective of finding a relation between the forms of a “religious” trance, that is Tarantism and other cults of possession still existing in many places of the world, and the modified

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<sup>52</sup> “Adorcism” is a term coined by Luc De Heusch (1962), inspired by Levi-Strauss, who created the term “adreaction”, starting from “abreaction”, to designate the sciamanistic process of healing. De Heusch considers the “adorcism” a process that lets happen a conciliation with the god. By identifying with him, the persons obtains the protection against the evil.

states of consciousness, that today many people, especially young, try to reach through music and dance.

In this frame it is included the recent phenomenon of the big concerts of Salento traditional music, that have their most famous expression in August, in the Apulian “Night of the Taranta” in Melpignano, where masses of people, coming from all over Italy, dance for the entire night on the tunes of the Pizzica Pizzica, executed by many Italian folk groups in different places of the territory and at the same time.

But the scanty and not serious studies of the modalities of the dance is bringing to the loss of its original form, in a sort of a partial new invention, that attests anyway the strong need of appropriation of a dance-symbol.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**TARANTISM AND TARANTELLA**  
**IN A *DOLL'S HOUSE*.**  
**A NEW HYPOTHESIS OF INTERPRETATION**

In the light of the results of my investigation on Tarantella dance, on Tarantism and its interpretations and on the knowledge that Ibsen could reasonably have of it, in this last chapter of my works I will formulate my interpretative hypothesis in relation with Nora's dance in *A Doll's House*.

Tarantism was a collective cultural instrument, shared by a whole community.

As though it was a redressing mechanism, it permitted to the impulses and the inner sufferings, otherwise repressed during all the year, to come finally out, but in a canonical time and way, so that they should not provoke subversive escapes from the society.

On the contrary, through the reintegration inside the society and its rigid rules, the "tarantati" put back in order their life, without risking the definitive and irreparable loss of control upon it.

All this happened in an area that, although very tied with the Dionysian rites of the Greek classical world, had developed a specific and peculiar mythological system and ritual, that can be considered, according to De Martino, in its own individuality.

Also in Bergsøe's investigation, Tarantism is clearly distinguished from the European dance epidemics, like the ones of St John and St Veit during the Middle Age.

Tarantism, also if with the due caution (it means that we cannot consider the whole drama in relation with it), comes with full right within the number of the symbols that shall be analysed in order to interpret Nora's dance in *A Doll's House*, and it comes, very realistically, through Bergsøe's treatise.

But what of this treatise can have captured Ibsen's imagination in his creation of the scene of Nora's dance?

In a tight dance perspective, we can see that Bergsøe divides the old Tarantella in two fundamental types: one that was danced together by many people and in precise places and that changed, in the course of the time, its lively character in a more orderly one; another one

that was danced by only one person everywhere it was necessary and that kept its frenzied character in the course of the time.

It is interesting, on this point, to note that in Ibsen's play we are in presence, directly or indirectly, of two Tarantellas, and a third one, Capri's Tarantella, is evoked by Nora's remembrance.

Taking in consideration only the two Tarantellas "in action", we can note how the rehearsals' dance of Nora has the characteristics of a frenzied and violent dance, performed alone.

Her Tarantella of the masked ball seems, instead, to get closer to those Tarantellas that were danced by many people and that became, later in the time, an expression of general entertainment.

Following Torvald's account of the feast, it's possible to see some parallel with Bergsøe's classification, all the more so because also the third Tarantella, evoked by Nora's remembrance, can be included in this type, that is the dance performed together by many people, although devoid of its therapeutic aims and transformed in a mere "artistic" object.

There is, then, a sort of continuous register of Tarantellas, where we have on one side the wild dance performed alone by Nora (her rehearsals) and on the other side the collective enjoining aspect, with the aim of a pure entertainment (the dance of Nora's remembrance, danced presumably by many people in the feast of Capri).

In the middle we have a ludic dance (Nora's Tarantella at the Stenborg's) that still keeps a potential of effects that are not only ludic. Here the admiration and the excitement produced in the public seem to be more pertinent to a merely erotic sphere than to the formally aesthetic one, as it is deducible by Torvald's comments after the feast and by his attempts of direction during the rehearsals of the previous day.

We have seen how the reality of Tarantella, also without considering its anthropologically most evident aspect, that is its connection with Tarantism, is anyway complex, with references to the "eros", to the life and to the death.

Also the Napolitan Tarantella, probably the one that Ibsen observed as a direct spectator, has a dense substrate of symbols, that complicate its meaning and comprehension.

Ibsen, following Bergsøe, keeps the connection with the dance of the Apulian "tarantate" (the so called "Pizzica Pizzica"), underlining its erotic character, that is one of the main aspects of this dance and that emerges factually in the feast at the Stenborg's.

Here the Capri-Tarantella of Nora, a pretty image at disposal of a taste that seems to prefer an idealized like postcard folklore, crosses the border and it becomes the erotic dance that provokes in Torvald the effects that we know.

But especially during the rehearsals of the day before, the Capri-Tarantella is transformed by the overflowing of instincts and denied feelings into something that is very near to the dramatic tension of Tarantism.

Bergsøe remarks and emphasizes that the music was functional to the dance and that the dance was the real therapy. He doesn't observe (like, instead, Kälher did) that the music had the power to provoke also unintentionally the ritual dance, but he reports an evidence of Valletta in which a woman, considered possessed by the daemon, as soon as she heard a musician in the street, wriggled free from the exorcists and followed him outside, prey to a dance outburst.

De Martino has expatiated upon this phenomenon produced by the music, that has a role that is much more active than the one of a mere harmonic support to the dynamism of the dance. The music, in fact, doesn't only sustain the dance, it provokes the dance.

What happens to Nora during the rehearsals set up by her as a ploy to avoid that Torvald looks inside the letter box?

She is taken by a sort of fury and, when Torvald observes that she dances as if her life should depend on it, she answers that it is just like that.

On this point all the scholars underline that the fear for the overhanging death (the suicide) is the only way out to motivate Nora's answer, but how suggesting is what Bergsøe writes, that the "tarantati" who weren't treated with the dance risked to go to their own death!

Nora, taken by the darkest thoughts, receives from the music the goad to dance the wild dance that healed the "tarantati" and that prevented their progressive sliding into death.

It is true that in this way Nora prolongs her rehearsals until the last moment, taking away Torvald from the letter box, but didn't the dances of the "tarantati" last for an entire day, being interrupted only to eat something and to take a short rest?

Factually the rehearsals stop because the housekeeper tells that the dinner is served.

It is evident that the connection made by Bergsøe between Tarantism, Dionysism and Maenadism (he remarks that these rites were very diffused in Magna Graecia) can be read in counter light in the vehemence of Nora's dance.

Leaving out these suggesting similarities, that remain just like they are, I remark that Bergsøe underlines that Tarantism was connected especially with the female sphere and that many women, according to the evidences of Baglivi and Valletta, simulated the sickness in the so called "small Carnival of the women", to give vent to their sufferings and frustrations, caused by their very hard life conditions.

In his analysis the Danish entomologist refers to the poor conditions of the women and to the consequent social implications.

Nora, who has spent her life telling lies, acceding to the whises of her father first and of her husband-father after, dances a frenzied Tarantella in order to prolong the rehearsals and to buy time.

In practice she "simulates" an incorrect dance, except to become prey, then, to an obsession that is not at all simulated.

The extreme condition of the women subject to Tarantism can be taken as a symbol of the consequence of power's abuse and marginalization of the women in other societies and epochs, not excluded the one in the end of the 19th century, where so many transformations and upheavals were close to happen.

As I have written in the introduction of this work, the Helmer experience in a dramatic way the transformation of the world in which they live and their dynamics result inadequate to face up to the ongoing upset.

Tarantella, that for this reason has always caught the attention of the scholars, is a symbol, among many, of the Helmer's marriage and it has functioned as an instrument of communication in Torvald's aesthetic and rigid vision of the world.

He is the regist, Nora the interpreter, of a performance that most probably has been repeated during the years. Through the liveliness of the Napolitan dance, the erotic fantasies of Torvald have found an outflow's way.

Nora, thanks to her performances, on one side has entertained and pleased her husband-father, but on the other side she has also got a certain contractual power used by her inside the relation.

This results from all the set of twitterings and behaviours of childhood devotion to the male figure.

Nothing is changed in Nora's life, according to her explicit statements during her discussion with Rank, when she compares her relation with her father to the one with her husband, and in the dramatic discussion with Torvald in the end of the play.



The type of relation that links Nora with the father figure and her husband crosses the border towards incest the moment in which Nora compares her husband to her father, replicating the childhood experience in the marital relation, "too much" faithful to the original model.

We don't know much about Nora and Torvald's situation at the beginning, but some points are clear. Nora's seduction of the incorruptible official, sent to investigate about her father, has brought to the good result of saving him from the quite inevitable consequences of his not transparent actions.

Is it possible to think that a daughter, so fond of her father, has given course to the love story with Torvald "also" to resolve a thorny problem?

Nora could have done it for love (for her father), exactly like after, always for love, as she explicitly says to Krogstad, she has put a false signature thanks to which she has obtained money to save her husband's life.

After all Nora could have put also some self-interest among the reasons of her marriage.

It emerges, in a subtle way, the theme of the contrasted "eros", managed by others, that so much weight, according to De Martino, had in the genesis of Tarantism.

In the opinion of the Napolitan scholar, who gives the right importance to the Greek myth of Erigon, the theme of the precluded "eros" refers to the separation from the childhood and from the father figure.

The epidemics of madness that hit the Greek girls had at heart this Oedipus knot. The young girls were subjected to the terrible difficulty of becoming adult women, because they had to abandon the childhood condition and to kill, metaphorically, the father figure in order to replace it with another male one.

Nora's Oedipus relation produces many behaviours that can appear absurd and that some scholars consider as a sign of her mental instability, but that anyway want to tell us that the soul inner is suffering.

It is possible to agree that Tarantella is connected with the hysteria or that many of Nora's behaviours are assimilable to the ones of the "tarantati", but in my opinion what Nora tells us with her gestures and words is the difficulty of living of a woman that is prisoner of an Oedipus relation.

We shall not forget that Nora grows up without her mother, in a situation in which, although with the presence of a nurse, there is not the parent of the same sex, that is the antagonist.

The link with her father becomes, almost inevitably, tight and central, and it is easy to imagine that it can be replaced only by a similar link, with the reproduction, then, of the childhood roles.

Such reflections help us to observe Torvald in a wider perspective.

He is surely the mediocre person that we are used to consider, but he is also a figure that, because of Nora's situation, cannot be different.

He is both rigid and obnoxiously hypocrite but he is, after all, the right successor (as moralist, authoritarian and master) of an awkward and central paternal figure in the emotional life of Nora.

Inside Nora there is, then, a sort of predestination to a relationship with a strong Oedipus connotation, and she cannot live it otherwise than in the same way as she has lived the relation with her father.

Like Nora, also Torvald is prisoner of this reiterated scheme, in which he is, with all his limits, also (and first of all) the double of somebody else.

It is now advisable to change the focus from the people to the context.

The context is a patriarchal family, with figures, roles and rules that are becoming more and more obsolete in the new times.

It is not by coincidence that Ibsen shows the relation between husband and wife almost as a performance, where Nora sings, dances and smiles always mincing and eager to please her affable but authoritarian owner. The communication is farcical, also if still functional.

But it will soon change. The transformations are arriving, starting from the new position of Torvald as director of the shareholder bank.

The expression "shareholder bank" carries a world, the one of capitalism, that arrives on the scene with all its unforeseeable credentials.

More or less all the persons of *A Doll's House*, consciously or unconsciously, feel the change and make projects, but nobody of them will obtain what he thought he could obtain.

Somebody will get things that he didn't hope, somebody else will lose what he considered as sure.

The impression is that the new times don't give any guarantee for a coherence in the events: action A doesn't necessarily give result B, as it was more or less in the old world.

There is an underlining unpredictability that is the precise counterpart of a freedom that appears wide and possible to everyone.

Actually all the persons of *A Doll's House* will obtain a wider freedom, included Torvald, who wakes up from his childish dream of presumed "aesthete-hero" husband and looks at the lie that has been all his life.

But there will be a price to pay for this freedom, that is evidently not so simple to conquer and first of all not painless.

In this context of changed times Tarantella, as a means of communication in the couple, is connotated as a scrap that doesn't function anymore.

Before it was used by Nora to please and probably to manipulate her owner. Now, under the dramatic pushes of the events, its final effect is not consonant with the traditional *mise-en-scène*.

Nora is taken by the fury during her rehearsals; in the masked ball at Stenborg she provokes Torvald's erotism, but she is not able to please him.

I want to remark that this happens before Torvald shows himself as he really is, so different from his wife's "dream".

Nora refuses to have sex with a man that first with hypocrisy discards Kristine (he makes a long rigmarole about the knitting and the embroidery) because she hinders his purposes, and then, bothered by the visit of Rank, doesn't seem so sad for the worsening health conditions of the friend.

Something of the hero-image is already compromised long before the reading of the letter.

Nora, shaken by the desperation for the waiting suicide (desperation that is burst in the rehearsals but that has influenced also the masked ball, when there was no need to simulate an uncorrect dance in order to buy time), feels that it is impossible for her to accept the fantasies of Torvald.

Although tipsy (or maybe just because of it: "in vino veritas"), he shows a coarse side of himself to the reckless wife, who wants to save him with the extreme sacrifice.

The pantomime doesn't function anymore!

The entire system of relations collapses when Torvald reads the letter of Krogstad, revealing his petty nature, far from the idealized image of intrepid rider that the wife cultivated in her game of illusions.

On the other hand, Nora herself, presents, in the course of the play, some aspects that are not in consonance with that famous image of protofeminist heroine that the history has emphasized.

It is enough to think to the ambiguous scene of Rank's seduction, complete with silk socks.

Here we understand that Nora is a person with controversial sides and that she has not developed any other communication code except the seduction.

After all it is easy to understand how fragile a creature this heroine is, so full of human weakness and not able to use anymore, in a changed context, her unique resource within the limits of a superficial and overpowering male world.

Destiny has rung the door of the Helmer's, like the famous first four notes of the Fifth symphony of Beethoven, composed about 70 years before, and nothing will be as before.

This destiny has the appearance of Krogstad, but also of Kristine, who wants Nora to clear up the situation, with an obstinacy that is something of suspicious.

Krogstad and Kristine are two people that belong, we can say, to that lower-middle class that tries to advance following the new market rules.

The Helmer themselves, although belonging to an upper social level, are approaching just now the coveted opulence, after a life that, except for the journey to Italy, has not been so comfortable.

Around the totem of the shareholder bank it breaks out as a sort of war among the poors (or nearly poors), eager to be part of the new world of the free economy.

In this world a woman, Kristine, obtains the job of a man, that, in his turn, doesn't want only to keep it but also to raise and improve it, thanks to the blackmail that he plots against the wife of the future director.

Krogstad, that knows Torvald from the youth, wants to get even with him. In the end he will not do it, but only because he will have other possibilities of reinstatement in the society through the love.

Kristine, that gets her job thanks to Nora, seems almost intended to put an end to the gold world, although false, of her benefactress, when she advises her to stop the ambiguity and to speak frankly with Torvald.

In my view this is more a destructive pretext than a good advise.

It is a world where nobody is anymore the person that seemed to be: everybody has "less noble" sides, that are continually unveiled, until the whole construction of the relations falls down.

Extraordinary is the figure of Rank, not much and not only for his complex relation with the Helmer, but first of all for his highly symbolic role of sick doctor, that dies without any possibility of treatment.

A fulminating figure in his extreme contradiction of incurable doctor.

Rank represents, then, also the remedy that is irremediably compromised; he attests, as a consequence, the definitively lost possibility to repair what is not more repairable.

It is not by chance that, like Torvald, he is not able to "normalize" Nora's dance, remaining, rather, an astonished spectator of a rite that slips through the fingers.

It means that also the music (and the dance), as instrument of healing and normalization, doesn't function anymore, even if it is given by the healer par excellence: the doctor.

I think, what shouldn't be undervalued is the fact that the good doctor too, as the others, shows "less noble" sides, not only in the ambiguous relation with Torvald, of whom he evidently desires the wife, but also, for example, through his unpleasant remark on the health of Kristine, when he seems to be ironic about the "hereditary defects". Really little congruent with the image of the kind, good doctor.

Another central symbol that stands out in the play is the money.

The heroic act of Nora is worth 1200 thalers (4800 crowns, Nora precises).

Nora asks for money from her husband, for her Christmas present.

The society has become more pragmatic. Also if the women should not ask for the loan of money without the permission of the father or the husband, Nora manages to get it, and she honours more or less regularly her debt, through every type of expedient made of savings and various small jobs.

Kristine, in the same way, after a marriage of convenience that has not ensured the expected economic welfare, has worked incessantly to earn a living for herself, for her brothers and her mother.

The women, then, are forced to go out in the world to earn the money that they need for their own life, but also to protect their relatives' life.

In this tension we can clearly see the outline of the slow process of freedom, where the women become more and more aware of the battle that they have to fight for the assertion of their equal rights in the society and in the family, or rather, first in the family and then in the society.

This is enough to identify the true dramatic core of *A Doll's House* in the contrast between two epochs and two different systems of values, the second of which isn't well defined because is still under construction.

The vicissitudes of the Helmer and of all the other people rotate around like a storm's eye, everyone with his own peculiarity, but all marked by the uncertainty, or, shall we say, by the end of the certainties and by the switch-over.

The most radical is Nora's switch, but all the microenvironment is destined to be redrawn, through new dynamics and new rules, as well as other rites.

The Helmer's private rites don't function anymore, because their world doesn't function anymore. Tarantella, as an instrument of outflow of the anxieties and the frustrations of the unhappy female condition, aimed to the reintegration of the "status quo ante" in a collective dimension, as we have seen in Tarantism, is by now ineffective for Nora. It doesn't assure her anymore the aesthetic-symbolic interaction with her husband-owner, through which they regulated also deep aspects of their relationship.

On the contrary, in an outburst of almost ancestral unexpected private Maenadism, the dance puts Nora in contact with her deep anxieties and it provokes in a tipsy Torvald an explosion of sensuality, evidently out of place in relation with Nora's mental status.

The private, but also public game, domestic theatre of the dynamics of their couple, doesn't direct anymore the respective drives to the usual and known geometry of their marriage.

Nora is overwhelmed by the fury, expression of her unconscious wish of escape, in contrast with her coexisting fear, of the choice of suicide.

This fury lets Torvald explode in an access of lust, so that he is intent only on his own pleasure.

Nora's refusal to his purposes, that I want to underline are out of place for her, which prepares the ground where the egoist and petty reaction of Torvald will quickly escalate.

Torvald, who thunders so much against people that put false signatures, has probably committed or endorsed himself some forgery too, if he has saved his father in law by the consequences of his inspection. His so passionate as hypocrite reprimand against the forgery committed by his wife and by those that have behaved in a similar way sounds really irritating.

The same dance that Nora has used before to gain time and that in the past represented presumably her joyful sacrifice on the altar of the aesthetic egoism of Torvald, obtuse artistic director of a hypocrite family rite, provokes now, as many other actions of the play, an effect that is opposite to the normalization: the destabilization.

Nora, almost a contemporary Maenad, escapes from the family and goes in the world, like the Maenads left the town to escape on the mountains.

Tarantism, that was in relation with Maenadism, was a complex system aimed, substantially, to avert these escapes through the yearly rite of the dance.

But for Nora there is not the possibility to be reintegrated in her old world anymore, no rite or devise can stop her.

All the Helmer's rites, that culminated in the exhibitions of Nora's dance and that basically integrated in aesthetic forms the Oedipus drives of their relationship, fail in their aim exactly through the most symbolical one, that is Tarantella.

Like the ritual of Tarantism that didn't function anymore, already in the end of the 18th century, when its condivision and cultural circulation came in crisis, also Tarantella, that Nora used to please the vanity and the fantasies of her husband and to achieve a balance with him, doesn't function in a changed society and it produces the premises for ending the relation.

A desperated and frightened Nora feels forced to refuse the advances of a Torvald that more insensitive and prosaic is difficult to imagine.

The condivision of the code is finished and Nora shall go away, not anymore "normalized" by the flattering approval of the husband, owner of the spectacle of Tarantella.

But is it necessary that she goes away in the way that we know? Even leaving her own children?

When Torvald proposes to close the time of the game and to start the time of education, why does Nora refuse it and remain steadfast in her decision to leave everything?

It seems that Ibsen intuits something fundamental and that, on the base of this intuition, he lets Nora make a choice that can seem extreme and forced.

To demonstrate this, I will refer to some considerations that P. Watzlawick, J.H. Veackland and R. Fish of Palo Alto Mental Research Institute in California (1974) made.

According to them, "there are two different types of change: one that happens inside a specific context that remains unaltered; another that, when it happens, changes the system itself". (Watzlawick, Veackland, Fish 1974: 27)

Based on this, they think that it is necessary to go out from the context where the problem has matured, to have the real change.

By remaining in the original context, that tends, as every "whole", to the homeostasis, that is the balance, no effective change will happen, but only a redefinition of the relations, inside a system that will remain the same in the facts.

Nora, that is Ibsen, intuitively grasps this concept and, in front of Torvald's extreme offer, she refuses categorically his proposal to start the education time. The dynamics of their relationships, are, in fact, based on a husband-father with a wife-daughter could only change in a husband-father-teacher with a wife-daughter-pupil. A new version of the old dynamics.

On this point we can further remark, about what is still today a quite difficult question to digest in relation with Nora's behaviour: the children's renouncement.

At a first reading it seems that Nora, by refusing her duty to educate the children, wants to take some revenge for the offences that Torvald has moved to her before.

But, after having noticed that the husband himself considered her unworthy of the children's education (a surely polemical assertion), she explains very well her reasons for a so extreme choice. Nora shall first of all educate herself.

To make clear the meaning of this decision, I have to come back to the point from which I have started this job: the speech pronounced by Ibsen at the banquet in his honour on the 26th of May 1898 in Christiania for the members of the Norwegian Union for the women's rights. In that occasion, besides politely confuting the thesis according to which he was a champion of the feminism, Ibsen added, just with regard to the women, a fundamental remark, that is a sort of appeal to the mothers:

det staar til *Mødrene* ved anstrengt og langsomt Arbeide at vække en bevidst Følelse af *Kultur og Disciplin*.../ Det er Kvinderne, som skal løse Menneskespørgsmaalet. Som Mødre skal de det. Og kun *da* kan de det. Heri ligger en stor Opgave for Kvinderne.<sup>53</sup> (Ibsen H.U. XV: 420-421)

At first sight this assertion seems to repudiate the behaviour of Nora, who renounces exactly to her role of mother. But, if we look better, it is not like that.

Ibsen speaks of a "sense of culture and discipline", two concepts that are concerned with the education in a very technical way. It means that the mothers should be true educators, not what they have been until now. It is evident, in fact, that the Helmer, together with the men and the women of the tormented Ibsenian humanity, have been brought up by mothers that haven't been able to give a proper education to their children.

Ibsen's mothers, if not even absent, don't seem to be up to this duty, or, at least, not completely.

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<sup>53</sup> My translation: "It is up to the mothers and their tiring and endless work to arouse a conscious sense of culture and discipline.../ The women will solve the problem of the human being. They will do it as mothers. And only in this way they could do it. Here it is a great duty for the women.



But there is some exception. In the play *The pillars of society*, for example, Lona Hessel and Marta Bernick are not natural mothers: they are like adoptive mothers.

They have been able to bring up others' children, to whom, not by chance, they have given freedom, pushing them to go out in the world to build their own life and, hopefully, their happiness.

And Nora?

Nora, may I remark has not had a "real" mother but has been brought up by her nurse Anne Marie and that maybe takes from this fact the necessary strength in the right moment, decides that her children shall have an adoptive mother.

Probably she does it without full consciousness, because she doesn't really feel able to bring them up in the light of principles that even she doesn't know, but it's a fact that she entrusts them to an external "parent".

Ibsen, then, draws the role of a "cultural" mother, that shall not necessarily be the biological one. Instead, it is maybe even better that she doesn't belong to the last category, according to the results that are under everybody's eyes.

The biological mothers have brought up the children that are the suffering humanity represented by Ibsen with infinite facets in contradiction, where the tangle of reasons and faults is almost inextricable.

Only by going beyond this traditional context of education it will be possible to found a new humanity in which the rights of the human beings, women as men, will be guaranteed and protected.

The fact that Ibsen refers both to women and men is clearly asserted by Nora.

Just before going away, in fact, in the dejection for having lost her capacity to believe in the most wonderful thing, she says to Torvald that they both should change.

Nora's Tarantella, with its relighting of desperated Maenadism, helps to reveal first to the protagonist and then to the world around her that this communication code doesn't function anymore. Nora, who has lived to please her father and her husband, discovers a society that presses against her door with laws that she doesn't know and that she cannot tackle with her childhood love that justifies every action.

The new world, with its legal quibbles, demands her to explain her behaviour.

When she tries to defend herself, opposing the law of the love as a daughter first and later as a wife, she discovers that just in the receiver of such love she doesn't find support but, on the contrary, blame.

Nora, then, who had already felt some resistance and suffering long before her “modern tragedy” begin – I think, for example, that she wished to shout out Torvald’s face “død og pine” (death and pain), almost like a child that is afraid to say something forbidden -, shall go along the only path way that she has in front of her, the one that will bring her to discover herself in the real world. A world where her domestic theatre has no right of citizenship and that requires many more concrete instruments than the seduction and a perpetual childish game.

The modernity, with its freedom to conquer at a high price, has burst into the quite and hypocrite life of the Helmer.

Everybody, from now on, men and women, will have to fight in order to build a new life.

The women more then the men have a big credit to the history, but all the humanity shall change in order to reach the new common rights.

Ibsen seems to say that nobody will be saved. Not the men, with their unbearable privileges; not the women, that will even have to rethink their most “natural” role: that of being a mother.

In the far and sunny lands of Apulia of the past centuries the notes of a “right” music moved from the desperation and the hypochondriac stupor thousands of women without name and face, condemned anyway by the repeating healing rite to come back in the shadow of a limited and repressed life condition.

In the same way, in the snowy and muffled Norwegian Christmas, a “right” music moves Nora’s vital instinct towards a rebellion that lets her cross the boundaries of her familiar world.

With the hope, this time, that she will not come back home like her unlucky and anonymous ancestresses of the land of Magna Graecia.

## CONCLUSION

Ibsen knows Tarantism from Bergsøe (according to whom the phenomenon is obsolete in the 19th century) and he draws, in *A Doll's House*, from a rite that he believes almost dead, but of extraordinary symbolic power.

I have tried to highlight its anthropological complexity in the extensive chapter on Tarantism, based on De Martino's works.

The rite, mostly linked with the female world, has authoritative antecedents in the Greek classical culture, that has handed down to us its meaningful myths.

But Tarantism has some peculiar and original features in comparison with its antecedents.

It is connected with the sphere of the repressed feelings, it speaks about oppression, suffering, precluded eros.

Its cyclic alternations of illness and recovery, of pain and rebirth or, as I prefer to think, of rebellion, suffering and normalization are a strong image of the life itself.

Its substance of pain and temporary catharsis is the core of the obsessive process of the life and it represents perfectly the struggle of the human being for the release from the sufferings and for the search for freedom and happiness.

From the manifold interpretations of Tarantism we can see a significant cross section of the scholars' positions in the different times and cultures with regard to the phenomenon.

Starting from Baglivi's "small Carnivals of the women" we arrive at De Martino, who underlines that the "tarantati" were not only documents of another epoch, but living people toward whom we had current duties"<sup>54</sup> (De Martino 2002: 93)

In this continuous excursus there is the story of the human way of thinking about an extremely human phenomenon. There is the man that reflects upon his frailties, griefs, hopes and illusions, upon his values.

On the threshold of the epochal change, the rites are in crisis and the cultural institutions collapse, being unable to meet with the transformations in the historical context.

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<sup>54</sup> De Martino's original: "i "tarantati" erano non soltanto documenti di un'altra età, ma persone vive verso le quali avevamo dei doveri attuali"

The women subject to Tarantism, at the time of De Martino's investigation in 1959, live the last scraps of a rite that has become remote from their contemporary culture.

The parents of Carmela, a young "tarantata" from San Pietro Vernotico, accepted with a big hope the visit of De Martino's equipe, that could help their daughter to recover from the illness.

When De Martino came back to Rome, he received a telegram where it was written: "Carmela is dancing. Come back"<sup>55</sup> (De Martino 2002: 93)

In this touching and naive request there is the break-up of a world that has no more coordinates from the past for an orientation in the present.

Like Tarantism which comes to an end, Nora's dance doesn't produce the usual results anymore. Ibsen, therefore, exploits a reference to an almost extinguished symbol inside a scene that also decrees an end: the one of the Helmer.

With a superb effect he remains of Tarantism by speaking of Tarantella.

He recreates the macrocosm in the microcosm.

Nora's microcosm, that breaks into pieces, contains the macrocosm of the outdated Tarantism, like the social theatre of Ibsen contains the life of the society.

Tarantella, in the "house of the doll" was a device, a subtle game, useful to communicate and to find a balance.

Many are the games that help life. The dance and the laughter of Nora, the marriage with the Oidipus disquieting implications, the small lies, the childish seductions and the dream of the "wonderful" offer a significant repertoire of this type.

But in the end life isn't a game, especially when we arrive at the core of the central questions of existence, the ones concerning love, death, children.

Then we have to answer first to ourselves, then to others.

This is what Nora tries to do by slamming the door behind herself.

No more Tarantella, no more affectedness. They don't function anymore.

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<sup>55</sup> De Martino's original: "Carmela balla. Venite"

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